THE GLOOM OF YOUR EYES

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The Heart of a Cat

And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit.

Rev. 9:1

Sonya is sitting on a little bench by a stairwell door, her child hands on her lap, looking straight ahead into the darkness of the bushes. She is not really seeing anything that a regular person cannot see, nor is she dreaming of something big and cold like a carbon iceberg — Sonya is a stranger to dreaming, because she does not believe that the future will come. To her right, a dark rectangle of a sixteen-storey house stained with yellow windows is towering over her — the house where she spent her cheerless childhood full of loneliness and tears. Her childhood... oh, what terror emerges now from its depths.

Sonya cannot live. The sleep does not visit her anymore to console her heart punctured with cold, to lower her stiff, doll-like eyelids, to dissolve at least a fracture of time in the warm oblivion of summer evenings in a rural apple orchard. Sonya's insomnia is an enormous stellar vortex beginning from her chest and turning her from a person into a cosmic element that does not need to rest. Sonya's path is leading into the past, and her feet rarely touch the ground.

Sonya raises her hands from her laps towards her face and untangles her white hair, looking in the mirror of the autumnal sky, strewn with stars. Sonya's legs covered with black stockings only to the mid-thigh are chilled by the ruthless wind. Her thighs are firmly closed, perhaps in order to evenly spread the cold and the entropy. Through an open window where lights are out, a radio is playing.

There is a name SVETA+ written on the wooden stairwell door with a piece of white brick. It seems to her that it is not at all meant for opening, but only for an illusion of a possibility to exit or enter. Its shabby edges had grown into the door jamb with splinters coming from under the paint; the handle had been long ago destroyed, and a misshapen hole had been made in the double plywood on human altitude; it seems that cats, birds or other purposeful animals had clawed through the fake object their true path.

A car is passing by Sonya slowly, pouring citric blood of its headlights onto the bushes. It stops by the neighbouring house and goes out. Nobody leaves its body polished by the frosty wind; the driver's head calmly descends onto the steering wheel. Sonya rises from her place and moves along the bushes by the line close to a Euclidean straight; the pavement painfully digs into her feet through the fabric of her stockings, devoid of shoes, making Sonya regret the unfallen rain.

Her calves flicker above the vespertine pavement illuminated by the bizarre faces of the chandeliers; she passes the second window, stops and looks into an empty lit window, as if she saw on a clean plastered wall of someone's kitchen a monstrous fly. At a real-valued angle of about 30 degrees a grey cat is running towards the house wall; one of those whose colour is purposefully picked for the life of stone yards and rusty eaves, hunting after mouse ghosts in the basement labyrinths and the expositional harmony with rich aestival sunsets of roomy roofs.

From where Sonya is standing now, a tree is visible; it grows at the other side of the house; a half-bare chestnut that still remembers the time when there was no concrete terror around it, only a weedy hill and several rural huts barely visible behind the web of the overgrown cherries. There are two hollows in this chestnut; one almost at it roots, in which boys of Sonya's childhood were making fire and blowing up firecrackers; the other sits one metre higher than human height; there Sonya once hid a doll which she had found in a sandpit; she covered her blue eyes with leaves, but the glow of these eyes found its way through the foliage, and an unknown thief carried Sonya's treasure away into the depths of unfamiliar stairwells where it smelled of old books and roast meat; where strange people appeared, not sharing with Sonya a common life.

Sonya takes a small comb out of her pocket and slowly does her hair, not even thinking to hurry. A young couple comes round the corner of the house; the girl wearing a cable-knit jersey is pushing the pram; she has got a red flashlight which lights her vespertine path. The wind is sticking thin strands of her hair, haircut escapees, to her face; her eyes cannot be seen; the man is sober and reserved. They turn down the street full of whispering poplars; the whirlwind is carrying away packs of colourless creatures up their trunks, creatures so dissimilar to humans. Sonya is slowly combing her white hair, and the wind is rendering her work endless, plaiting it again. A connection can be sensed between Sonya and the wind, perhaps because they both are visitors from a different time.

Finishing her fruitless work, Sonya puts her comb back into the pocket and continues moving on along the line of the bushes; she reaches the corner of the house and sees another one, dark and unfinished, looking like a shadow of something terrible. People in hard hats are walking on top of it, lit by the moving beams of the floodlights. By the house entrance some concrete beams stick out of the ground like columns of an ancient cathedral, and a dumper truck bogged down in mud is illuminating the unfinished wall before it aslant. Firstly Sonya thinks about the strange eyes of the cars that emit light instead of capturing it, then about the souls of the unborn people dwelling in the rooms covered with brick shards and construction waste, and lastly about the satanic faces of the construction workers scorched with concrete dust and alcoholic blizzard; men in yellow hard hats and women in faded headscarves, who, not knowing any architectural plan and required amount of brick, erect at night enormous structures of human memory with cosmic matter of dreams. Akin to vampires, they move slowly along the jibs of the cranes, shouting something in an unclear swearing language of the dead; their construction has no end and grows like a malignant Tower of Babel, striving to reach the cold silk of the clouds.

Getting bogged down ankle deep in the wet mud, Sonya goes through huge rusty gates and finds herself on a sandy square churned up with dumper truck wheels; by the base of the concrete beams with rusty rods embedded in them, using which the witchcraft of the dead reinforces the matter of concrete. At the edge of the square on a sandy mound, a pile of glass wool soaked with oil is ablaze, resembling a darkened corpse of a rhino. The shadow of a stack of white slabs being moved across the air with the crane covers Sonya, and she, lifting her head, shouts upwards with all her might. Her voice blends into the screeching of crane chains and metal cables against the edges of concrete slabs and floodlights clamps, strained by the wild force of the wind. It flies into the square eye sockets of the glassless windows, and the master-builders of their own deaths see a ghost of a seagull being carried by wind into the depth of stone that rose from the ground, superior to the depth of the stellar sky above. An avalanche of shrill shouts answers her; the faces deform with pain that cannot be measured by the living; pieces of brick and sharp trowels poisoned with mortar fall at Sonya; sand explosions surround her. Sonya removes her hair from the temple, and this spot is at once hit by a quarter of a brick broken by the hands of the 14th Christ — the Christ of builders and colliers. Sonya falls back spreading her hands, and the galactic rivers quicken their current, washing her face with icy water; the translucent fishes, filled with measured grains of light, kiss her

naked body, and all of the forty-eight wind directions, of which only four are known to humans, appear to her, and she sees the answer to her question.

She sees a geometric field covered with black marble, immense like an empty airfield, and a square pyramid of black glass in the middle of it, with stairs carved in its sides, and twelve beautiful Komsomol girls, standing at symmetrically correct spots, holding torches, their hair plaited, Komsomol badges on their black knee-length dresses, and a forest of mirror-like anthracite trees, and falling snow between their trunks, strewing the hair of countless rows of Pioneers, giving their eternal salute, and three black lakes, from the surface of which sepulchral fog is rising, and a black tower between them, which reflects in the mirror-like smoothness of the solar fire concentrated into a pitch-black underground liquid, and the sun himself, hanging amidst the black stellar sky, with burning tongues of fire at his rim, but giving no light to the earth.

She hears the thunder of underground trains, rushing through impenetrable darkness, hidden with soil from the eyes, where screeching tread of the workshops is vibrating, recycling lime into salt, stone into bread, wood into human flesh. She guesses the expanse, hidden in the *terra firma*, full of cherry orchards, white domes and blooming fields, inaccessible to eyesight because the light immediately fades in the mysterious cool space of their being; she guesses the trace of the one she is searching for, the otherworldly look of his squinted eyes, and the sizzling desire to see his face again takes over her.

The construction workers bury Sonya at the left side of the building — the left side when one stands with the back turned to the main entrance — under the bottom of a pit that had been opened to place the next concrete stilt for the future annexe foundation. With her virgin child corpse Sonya shall reinforce the structure and sanctify the chosen spot, according to the ancient custom of builders and colliers, for the crimes of whom the uninitiated usually blamed the Jews. One of the foremen wants to mutilate the girl's face with the trowel for extra secrecy, yet, having reasoned that no one will likely sniff her out, and the face will surely rot for some time before that, they bury her as she is, and one of the female workers who has her own children even puts a tattered quilted construction jacket under Sonya, the one that had been used to scare off the crows from the boiling tar kettles; she also turns Sonya's head towards the sunrise side, not from religious motives, but so that the sand will not get into her nose; still, no one volunteers to wipe the blood off, and the crane operator, whose face could not be seen under his hat, simply spits down onto

Sonya, aiming at her face, but does not score and swears angrily because they are burying the girl already.

The work stops at the construction site around 2 A.M. For around half an hour after that the workers are burning a live cat wired to a stilt and drinking yellowish murky liquid from a three-litre jar, pouring it into metal mugs; they are telling different stories, smoking and eating luncheon meat. Then they return to their site cabins, where they are having very violent group sex, torturing their women, who are far outnumbered by the men. At this very moment, which lies beyond human perception, because then they are either still asleep or already dead, Sonya crawls out of the sandpit and washes her face in a puddle formed in an unevenness of a concrete piece. She takes off her dirty stockings and wipes her arms and legs with them, soaking them in water. She washes the blood off her face and soaks the hair, clung to the cut on her temple. Sitting on concrete, she shakes the sand out of her hair and spits it out of her mouth. Sonya feels no anger, and nonchalantly listens to the hits against the metal walls of the cabins, and to the blissful cries of the penis-rubbed drunken slags.

Having crumpled her stockings and thrown them into a paint can, Sonya props her elbows on her knees and her cheeks on her palms, and starts thinking about how the present turns into the past, and about the mysterious will of God, marked in her dream as the letter "*Ъ*" written in the eternal book. She imagines God in his tree form, that seems to be the most terrifying and disturbing form to her. God has no direction in the geometric sense, because he grows out of and to nowhere. Despising the omnipresence that reposes solely on human comprehension, Sonya localises God in front of her and endows him with features of an enormous werewolf ruling over the wind and the rain. God's mortality is beyond dispute, and he is already long ago dead in the future, but in the past, created by him as a trap for the living beings, there is no escape. Sonya felt how an unknown force is driving her to the impassable wall of creation, where God himself, and the ones who control him, will grind her living body into bloody fat mixed with hair.

The pile of glass wool on the construction site is going out slowly, and the wind is carrying the faint stinky smoke to the darkness of the nocturnal fields outspread into infinity. Sonya jumps off the slab, approaches the burned cat wired to a stilt, and warms her rimy feet in the lukewarm ash. The wind makes the stars tremble like baubles; the moon made of dry white stone lies on the roof of the house.

With a sharp rusty piece of metal Sonya enters the dark site cabin,

where large people smelling of sweat are sleeping; they have thick fingers from constant concrete work and their arms are outstretched. She sees an unshaved masculine face in the illuminated floodlight triangle with an open mouth hissing in its sleep; the face fills the entire spot of light and therefore appears even bigger. She raises the metal piece with both hands and strongly pokes the sleeping man in the eye. The whole body of the man twitches; his legs creak against the bunk; he moves his head twisting his neck; his mouth makes a hoarse sound, while Sonya circles her tool in his eye with a meaty sound, and the inky blood, pushed by her out of the head, runs down the man's face into the darkness. When Sonya understands that the man is already dead, she pulls the piece smudged with brain out of his head and squats in front of the second man, sitting asleep by the wall; his trousers are open and his thick sausage-like penis is sticking out of the zip. The man is snoring and moaning in his sleep; it is likely that he continues seeing identical schoolgirls playing with flowers and other objects of dead nature in a half-dark flat, while Sonya puts the rusty point against his eye and inserts it with a whistling gasp. The man's trunk moves forward at once, as if he went at an insertion-ready female body, then he springs up, pushing Sonya to the bunk and snatching the metal piece from her hand with a woody, cattle-like force; he flings himself to the other side of the cabin and, having hit it, leans aside, opens the door and falls out on the short stairs that sink into the void of the ground.

Not concerned about his fate anymore, Sonya finds a hatchet for cutting meat logs, and using it instead of the metal piece, kills a half-awake woman with a beautiful and rapacious face, who with her calloused hands blindly tries to protect her stomach idly impregnated by the dead men, while Sonya simply hits her head, killing her on the second chop. Having mounted the female body, Sonya bites through the woman's neck and slowly sucks the pulsating flow of her blood; she is snuggling her stomach and chest onto the life-giving corpse, and thus, sucking, falls asleep and drowns her face in the gigantic liquid flowers in her dream, full of otherworldly colours of paradisiacal gardens.

Before dawn she wakes up and leaves her iron hollow; instead of the treads, she is stepping on the corpse blocking the short stair, its chin pressed to the mud. Everything around is asleep, embraced with stillness, and heavy time slowly dives into its abyss, and the moon, savouring the loneliness, had turned to the Earth its horrible rear face. Sonya enters the unfinished house, recognizing every single stair and every single tool left by the workers, and goes up to the top floor. It is pitch-dark inside the house; the beams of the floodlights do not get

here, and occasionally Sonya's shoulder touches the spiky and scorching fur of the invisible creatures, crawling on the walls. Somewhere in the nearing black height water is running; these are the stars seeping through the border of divine dominion and slipping into eternity. The rooms of the top floor have no ceiling, and in the middle of one of them a big puddle reflects the moonlight. There Sonya washes her face and rinses her mouth, smelling of blood. The estate grounds strewn with bare trees, streetlights extinguished in water, and few cars are visible out of the window.

Sonya climbs up into the window opening and looks down with indifference on the mound of sand and on the excavator tilted downhill. Having stepped forward, she flies a couple of metres and lands with both legs onto a thick metal cable, connecting the crane to the house wall. She is procuring the balance for a few seconds, spreading her arms and teetering on the vibrating cable, and the poisonous fabric of the rusty metal is burning her bare feet. At last, the cable and Sonya's body cease all vertical movement, and she, embraced with the marshy one-dimensional space, easily climbs the cable towards the crane ladder, then climbs it to the crane cab and then out on the jib. There Sonya needs precision, and, standing at the tip of the jib by the sheave wrapped with wire rope smelling of grease, she is for a long time calculating the distance, until she flies over to the facade of the neighbouring house landing at the ninth storey altitude. The flight does not come so easy, and she is fighting the wind for a long time, sprawled on the cold concrete wall streaming with translucent nocturnal air, before she manages to jump down onto an open balcony. Here, rocking in an old cane chair covered with a ragged blanket, Sonya is awaiting the following night to continue her path.

She chose for her nest a balcony which belongs to a flat occupied by a fossil and a hag, both decrepit and diseased, yet the fossil still can go outside, so he buys bread, kefir and noodles, from which the hag then cooks bland food. The life of the geriatrics passes almost without any sound, so the morning hours fill Sonya with calmness. She watches the crows fight on the roofs, and pays absolutely zero attention to the doctors and the police, encircling the corpses of the construction workers offed by her, covering them with bedsheets, writing something in their notebooks, smoking their poisoned cigarettes and finally departing towards the blowing wind, expecting to find Sonya there, perhaps.

The autumnal sun ascends into the blue cold sky, like a living being, glowing with blinding fire, readying to jump down. Sonya closes her

eyes and sees a huge spruce, adorned with bright colourless electric lights, feels the smell of heated resin and glue on wrapped up New Year presents. From the window open onto azure heavens, comes Santa Clause, wearing his red clothes with a white trim, a patterned hatchet in his belt. He approaches the Snow Maiden standing near the spruce, and lifts her above the ground by her hair. Not able to play dead anymore, the Snow Maiden is shivering and screaming. Santa Clause looks into her mouth, then hits her head hard against the wall with a cracking sound until blood starts running from the Maiden's nose. She is not screaming anymore, only wheezing, hysterical, with her gaping mouth, and then something oily starts trickling down there from Santa's nose with a grunting sound, making the Snow Maiden retch, but Santa's hands firmly drag her head back by the plaits; she soon quiets and falls, dropped onto the floor, continuing to shake and twitch like a lizard. Santa Clause takes off his hat, and everyone sees that he has a head of a chicken. The children get scared and run away, leaving Sonya alone. She approaches Santa Clause and tugs at his sleeve, pestering for a present. But Santa Clause only looks at her with his chicken head and squints mockingly.

Having opened her eyes, Sonya sees the fossil in front of her; he has gone out to the balcony in search of a jar of pickled cucumbers that he had eaten personally around two years ago. Instead of the cucumbers he found Sonya, and was a little surprised, because he has forgotten how she got onto his balcony.

— My name is Sonya, Sonya Pavlovna, — declares Sonya, getting out of the chair. — I'm your guest.

— The kefir shop is now closed, — answers the fossil heavily, turning his back to the balcony and climbing back into the room. — We will cook our own kefir now.

— Well, good for you, — Sonya cheers him up.

— And what did they make from the bread? They made soup from it. The Soviet regime! — the fossil shuts the balcony behind Sonya. — So, soup we buy. We will cook our own soup from kefir now.

— Well, good for you, — repeats Sonya again, stretching her legs on the floor strewn with hair, dust and cockroaches. — Do you happen to have a cat?

Having misheard the question, the fossil looks into Sonya's mouth with his rheumy eyes, just the way Santa Clause looked into the Snow

Maiden's mouth in Sonya's dream; now Sonya understands why. She does not have to repeat the question, because a gaunt grey cat enters the room and sniffs at Sonya's feet in search for food.

Some time later the fossil and Sonya are drinking tea in a small, smoke-stained and squalid kitchen with a scorched oilcloth on the table and a peeling sink with a grimy dish rag in it. The cat walks around Sonya's feet, asking for food, and Sonya understands that the cockroaches are her only sustenance.

— And what do your cockroaches eat? — asks Sonya.

— Well, what do they eat...they eat bread, they eat kefir, they eat noodles, — answers the fossil. — They eat bagel, — he adds, turning to the empty bread bin with a bagel half in it. — Take the bagel, my dear, you do have young toofies.

Sonya takes the ossified bagel; nicks on its side resemble ancient bracken imprints on stones compressed by earth; she puts it by the cup with pale sugarless tea. The bagel is of course older than the cat.

— And do you remember Lenin, grandpa? — she asks, looking into the muddy window.

— Alive I have never seen Lenin. He died before me.

— Died why?

— I don't know, my dear. Got ill and died. I will get ill and die. And you as well will get ill and die, though you are little.

— I do not believe that Lenin died, — says Sonya, looking into the window and scratching the oilcloth with her finger. — That was only written for you in the newspaper.

— He croaked, honey. He croaked, the dog. No matter what a human is, still dies like a donkey. Be it Lenin, or be it my hag.

— Your hag will undoubtedly croak, — Sonya reasons confidently. — But Lenin will forever be alive.

— You, girl, have remained a Pioneer, haven't you, — wonders the fossil.

— Yes, I have never been accepted into Komsomol.

— But where is your red tie then?

— I can't find my tie anymore, — Sonya scratches the oilcloth viciously. — It is Lenin who I want to find.

— My, my. It is Lenin she wants. Well, go to the Mausoleum, there will your Lenin be lying. Like a log, with a lamp in his head.

— You, grandpa, are old, but still you say silly things. For such silly things God may eat you.

— God won't eat me, I don't believe in him. If God existed, he wouldn't allow soup to be cooked from kefir. But my hag, she does believe in God, so her will he eat, — saying last words the fossil tries to laugh, but emits only a hoarse gasp.

— You are mistaken, grandpa, — Sonya explains patiently. — Everything will turn out completely differently. God won't eat your hag, but your hag will eat you, after she dies. And about Lenin you are wrong; he isn't at all dead; he still lives, but you just haven't seen him.

— But who lies in the coffin if it isn't him? I did visit him, had a bread crust in my pocket; he smells like poison, like a tortoise in a museum, — the fossil gets embittered and puffs on a stinking soviet Vatra cigarette.

— Lenin rose from the coffin and went away; they put an artificial doll there to make everyone believe that he died, — says Sonya. — I know where real Lenin lives, but I can't find that place. Black lakes should be there. They are deep like wells, because they are holes in the ground. There is also a forest of stone there, like a mirror, and it snows. Do you happen to know such a place, grandpa?

— There is no such place on earth, and you, honey, should get injections into the back of your head. My hag also went to the hospital before, and now she can't walk.

— And your hag, as you call her, she also doesn't know where Lenin lives, or is she only pretending?

— Why do you keep asking, who told you that about Lenin?

— You did forget Lenin quickly, didn't you grandpa.

— For me it is hard to remember, I am old.

— But he remembers you, though he is more than a hundred years old. He sees how you eat bread with kefir here. And you don't see

him. You don't even have his portrait. You, grandpa, are an old communist, everything shows that, but you are a scumbag still. Because you don't believe in communism and never believed in it, I guess.

— You're a scumbag yourself, — says the fossil gruffly, smoking the cigarette with his knotty vascular fingers. — I would kill you.

— That you want to do so that I don't remind you of your youth and of the bright communism. I will take your cat; you have nothing to feed her with anyway; I can even buy her from you if you want, — Sonya produces money from the chest pocket of her cement—stained blouse and puts it on the table.

— You will turn the cat in for soap apparently, — says the fossil heavily, and powerless sadness is seen in his eyes.

Sonya pushes her chair back with her legs, takes the cat and goes down the hallway to the bedroom, where the hag, emaciated by disease, is sitting in her armchair and looking into the window. Her glasses are put on the stool by the armchair, as well as a newspaper.

— Hello, grandma, — says Sonya, putting the cat on the floor and, having approached the armchair from the back, takes a headscarf lying on a little dresser and deftly slips it onto the hag's neck. The hag's swollen face reddens; with hissing she gasps for lacking air. Sonya attentively looks at her bulging eyes from the side.

— What now, grandma, do you see the black lakes? — she asks, and eases up on the headscarf that the hag is trying to grab convulsively.

— Yeth, I do, thweetie, — says her toothless mouth weakly.

— And the forest of stone? — Sonya tightens the noose again and puts her knee against the armchair for better support. The hag is pulling faces and thinking only about her death. When Sonya eases up on her again, the hag's brain flooded with diseased darkened blood does not want to reconnect with the rest of the organs of her body anymore.

— Meat thtore, — says the hag her last words. Her hands drop on the stomach. Sonya pulls out the headscarf from under her drooping head and puts it back on the little dresser. Leaning forward to the hag's face, Sonya stretches her open toothless mouth with her fingers a little and spits in it. Then she catches the cat, approaches the window, gets up on the sill, and, opening the venting pane, throws the cat

down from the ninth floor. Having done that, Sonya closes the pane and leaves the flat, noting that the fossil is still sitting in the kitchen at the same spot and smoking his cigarette.

— Goodbye, — says Sonya from the doorway. The fossil does not hear her, immersed in memories about his youth and the bright communism.

Having taken the elevator scratched with nails down, Sonya finds the corpse of the cat crashed down onto the pavement; blood is running from its mouth; the skin on the stomach has burst open. Sitting by it on her heels, Sonya takes out the cat's heart and bites it off its blood vessels. Then she hides the heart in her mouth and walks away through the cold sunny estate grounds in the direction that will eventually bring you to the northern sea if you walk for a very long time.

The Lakes of Oil

...And if any man will hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth, and devoureth their enemies: and if any man will hurt them, he must in this manner be killed.

Rev. 11:5

Natasha's father was a construction worker, and her mother was a nurse. When Natasha was nine years old, her father ruptured his stomach, carrying stone at the construction site, and died in hospital. Only few people attended father's funeral, but trampled flowers were rotting on the black pavement and on stairwell steps. Natasha thought that these flowers were given to her mum, and having collected them in a cardboard box, put them in a jug. But mum threw these flowers away and soon got married second time to a smoke-stained man, who was treated in her hospital. Natasha did not love her mum's new husband and refused to call him father, for what mum hit her on the face with her strong palm.

In Year 5 Natasha started smoking, and in Year 6, at her fellow student Vitya's birthday, she started engaging in sexual activity. But Natasha's favourite hobbies were dancing at discos and drinking vodka. She often was soused, instinctively striving to reach absolute insight, and scuffled with her girlfriends, pulling their hair. After Year 9 she went to a Vocational technical school to complete building the house that her father never managed to. In the technical school she had two abortions, and after graduating started working construction. Natasha tolerated men only for the bed, but actually hated them, and all men called her a whore. In the last evening of her life Natasha drank a lot of moonshine and let her coworkers Dima and Tolik impregnate her in a long stupefying rut on the dark cabin bunk. During the impregnation this trinity behaved like animals; they growled, roared, hit their heads against inanimate objects, swore and even tore an undershirt on Natasha. Sweaty and exhausted by the multiple semen intake, Natasha submerged into a swoon-like sleep the awakening from which was terrifying. From it Natasha remembered only the face of a beautiful white-haired girl with an unmoving glance like power socket holes, and the terror of death that dug into her head with its avian claws.

Natasha, covered with a plastic quilt, is lying naked on a freezing table. On the quilt's surface frost is forming. A white terrifying lamp is

shining somewhere from above. Natasha thinks that she is in the next world already. Inhuman cold stands in front of her as a church with many belfries, soaring skyward. Natasha's lips start moving, remembering her committed sins. The confession makes her very sick. Someone's strong arms grab Natasha under the armpits and by the legs, carry her away from the lamp into darkness, then put her, face down, on cold metal and rip the quilt off.

— Well, how do you like our bride? — a hoarse masculine voice asks. — We aren't heating her up; she almost didn't get stiff. Not so many freckles on her even. It's like she's alive.

— It's high time, — a younger voice answers him. — Not freckled, what a girl... So cold though, bitch!

— Yes, this one is not of those who warm you up, — the elder one laughs. — What about we have her together?

— You do know I can't stand that, — answers the squeamish young one. — Me first; you'll start cutting her body open with the scalpel, because you can't do without cutting the body open, can you.

— Well, no sex is possible without a scalpel, — agrees the elder one and slowly walks away whistling and crunching through the mud-covered linoleum.

The young one grabs Natasha's body, heavy from death, by her ankles, drags it, putting her stomach against the edge of the table, her legs dangling over the floor. Then, taking of his trousers, he leans onto Natasha's bottom, calling her Liudmila quietly. Suddenly twisting around, Natasha grabs his throat and starts choking him. He tries to push her away, but she hits his nose several times with her forehead, cold and wet from the evaporated frost, taking a full swing and looking him in the eyes. Blood runs from the man's nose, his pupils roll under the eyelids. When he stops breathing, Natasha lets him fall, chest on the table, bends over and vomits a dark cadaveric goo with a barking sound in disgust.

There is another table nearby. There lies the naked corpse of the fossil, who did not believe in Lenin's eternal life, covered with plenty darkened stab wounds. After Sonya's leaving, the fossil still stayed in the kitchen for a long time, then went to the hag to ask her what name he had been called by twenty years ago. Something heavy piled on him in the dark hallway, knocked him down and started gnawing his face with toothless jaws. Remembering Sonya's words, the fossil

got scared and started hitting the dead hag's head with his weak fists. But the hag crushed him, and he died, now convinced in Sonya's correctness. The hag hauled the knife from the kitchen and was eating the fossil raw, remembering the forgotten taste of meat, then she crawled out to the balcony with a knife and a bloody piece in her mouth and toppled over the railing thinking that she would fly, but she fell and smashed her head, thus finding eternal rest.

Natasha takes the dead man's sweater and puts it on. She is disgusted to put on the trousers, and, naked below the waist, she drags the man by his hair to the freezer and smashes the white lamp with her fist. Having chosen three male corpses, one female and one boy's corpse, Natasha, succumbing to unclear craving, pours her vomit into them, mouth to mouth, climbing onto the shelves. When the killed man's partner comes, lighting his way with a flashlight, Natasha does not let him turn on the emergency lights; she attacks him from the back, and putting her arm around his throat, gauges his eyes out with the fingers of her second hand. From that the man falls on the floor with a loud howl of a monkey, dropping his flashlight, and Natasha kicks his head with all her might, until the neck snaps with a short sound.

At 5 A.M. in the morgue courtyard a mixed group of six dead people appears; a tall bald man is armed with an axe, and a young woman wearing a sweater, in whom Natasha can be easily recognised, is holding a metal stick ending with a sharp hook that is used for corpse dragging. A second woman with a burn on her face wraps herself in a dark blanket, and a man who brings up the rear is limping heavily, because a piece of his foot is missing. They get into a minivan that plays the role of a hearse; the lame man takes the wheel; Natasha takes the front seat beside him, and they head towards the chemical factory, situated on the north side of the city, that ceased poisoning the environment a long time ago for financial reasons. They drive through empty streets in darkness; the driver strictly maintains the lane discipline; Natasha, unbelted, sits relaxed, leaning back in the seat, and looks at the streetlights with unseeing glance.

All what is happening seems odd to Natasha, but does not frighten her, maybe because she does not believe in her own death, not finding reasons for it. Raising her hand lazily, she touches the wound on her head and puts fingers in it. A rattle of one of the men raised by Natasha, starts coming from the back. He doubled over on the dirty minivan floor and is writhing in pain that devours his rotten intestine. The rattle turns into a deep roar; the man starts hitting his head against the body of the car, crawling sideways between his comrades

sitting in silence.

— Stop, — says Natasha to the driver, and the van stops on the side of an empty avenue. A drunk man wearing an unbuttoned coat is moving along the pavement. Natasha takes her stick, takes a bucket from under her seat with her other hand, and gets out on the square of dank earth strewn with red leaves, where a maple grows. The man immediately notices the half-naked woman poorly lit by the streetlights approaching him with a bucket and a metal hook; he does not like this sight, but blaming the excessive alcohol intake for it, he simply tries to run away into the depth of an unfamiliar alleyway. Quickening her pace, Natasha easily reaches her victim and hits him on the head with the hook. The man falls down immediately, and Natasha smashes his head thoroughly with the well-directed blows of the hook. She licks her lips and rolls her eyes round the dark windows of the houses, sitting on the pavement with the edge of the bucket under the blood fountain. The place where Natasha is milking the killed man is far away from the nearest streetlight, so even those awake at that time cannot see the look of these eyes.

From the bucket the driver drinks first, rumbling revoltingly, then, when the minivan moves on, Natasha hands it over to the passenger cabin. The woman wrapped in the blanket pours some blood off into her tin can; the morose boy drinks from his cupped hands and winces in disgust; the bald man drinks the rest with sucking slurps, and the one that is writhing on the floor cannot partake in the repast already; something thick and stinky is coming out of his mouth, looking like bits of decayed innards; his roaring chokes in this disgusting matter, turning into a shuffling rattle. Around 6 A.M., when the day barely starts breaking, the van stops by a failing concrete fence of the chemical factory.

Sonya arrived to the factory on foot; it took her a lot of time, but time meant little to her; besides, she had to linger in one of the new neighbourhoods that her path went through to kill in a stairwell a Year 8 student Nadya returning from school, for the purpose of seizing her boots and tights, so that she does not drag too much attention walking barefoot. The boots were a bit too big for Sonya, but she liked their shape and black colour. The tights were flesh-coloured, which Sonya did not like, besides they were ripped on the back of the right thigh. Although Nadya wore a long school dress, and nobody could see the hole while she was alive. Sonya approached her at the elevator and, grabbing her hair sharply, hit her head against the wall. In the elevator Sonya broke the unconscious schoolgirl's neck with a cracking sound, propping her up against the wall and kicking her chin. She

then went to the top floor, lugged Nadya up a metal ladder to the roof, where between heaven and earth took her boots and tights off, took a black felt tip from her schoolbag, tore a sheet of paper out of a notebook and wrote in capital letters of Nadya's own handwriting: “I want to remain virgin forever. Nadya”, then put the sheet by the corpse on the hard bitumen of the roof. She then drew a cross on the forehead of the dead girl.

Having committed these blasphemies, Sonya went across the roof to the other side of the house, from where she flew over onto the neighbouring one in her ordinary way. It was good flying in new boots. Moving further across the roofs of similar houses, practically made for the likes of Sonya, who unlike birds cannot fly upwards, she travelled very far away from the scene of her recent crime, then she went down to the street surface and continued her path.

Having no real need for sleep, by 6 P.M. Sonya still got onto a tall old lime tree to slumber; mistletoes in its branches grew together into a big greenish ball that had served as a nest for different foul creatures since time immemorial. Having made herself comfortable on a crooked branch, Sonya fell asleep with her eyes open, staring at the windows of the house facing her; they alternately lit up and went out, following at an accelerated pace the fate of the enormous lamps of the cosmos. With rustle, the wind was carrying over the paved ground the pages of a newspaper read by no one; it swirled and crumpled them, raising high above the earth. Night fell a long time ago; sparse pink streetlights were alight. Their rueful, pale and somewhat dull light, illuminating smooth streets between the houses, the dark estate grounds with silhouettes of half-bare trees, the dustbins and the broken benches, on which no one sat except for cats, provoked a feeling of the infinity of death and loneliness that Sonya so much loved. These dark spaces in the openings between the houses reminded her of the piercing uncertainty that overwhelmed her in childhood when she went to her girl friend's place watching the stellar sky, huddling and thinking about the gloves forgotten at home; about the beauty of the autumnal maples visible behind the nursery school fence; about the alien darkness of the gully-like streets, falling through to all points of the compass; this darkness seemed to Sonya to be her future, the obscurity of her own fate. Back then she met people with indistinct alien faces slating from the wind, who looked like shadows sliding across the house walls; they went from nowhere and hurried nowhere; it seemed like they were being carried by the wind; their unclear dark life felt to Sonya to be her own future life; she got scared, and little prickly chills of despair gathered between her shoulder blades. There were adults sitting in the stairwell of her girl friend's

house; red cigarette lights were whirling in darkness; lovers were licking to each other their open mouths with wet tongues; guitars were playing and it smelled of wine. Calling the elevator, Sonya was pressing herself against the elevator doorframe, shivering, when someone was coming down the stairs, as if they could take her and drag her up the dark stairs to the black sky where these werewolves live in their caves carved in the iceberg of time. Once a young man, going downstairs, noticed Sonya and, having stopped beside her, asked what her name was. Sonya uncovered her name to him, agonisingly waiting for the elevator she had called to arrive, and the man laughed quietly, breathing wine on Sonya; then he took her by her shoulders and kissed her forehead, and his lips burned Sonya with the coldness of eternal damnation and the inverted underground churches. And then Sonya realised that the Devil loves her.

At half past seven Sonya spat out the sucked dry cat heart, caught the right moment when there was no one around the tree, came down and started harassing the passers-by, asking where the meat store is. Finally, a woman, a bank employee with lips painted purple, smelling strongly of perfume and shampoo, showed her the way, because she herself visited the meat store often to buy mutton for her awful children.

When Sonya entered the meat store, there were no customers, only the butcher named Kolya; the moment he saw Sonya, he immediately imagined her naked and lying her stomach down on the butcher's block. Sonya approached the counter and started examining the meat hanging behind him on the wall. She was examining the meat mutely and intently, as if it were a piece of art. Kolya was silent too, his strong arms crossed on his chest; in his imagination he was thoroughly quartering Sonya with a big cleaver, frying her body parts on a spit, and eating them. The desire to undress, rape brutally, slaughter, chop up and gobble down the girl standing in front of him was consuming Kolya's whole lazy ursine being so strongly, that he hardly suppressed the urge to grab Sonya's hair with his one hand stained with cattle blood and fat, grab the cleaver with his other hand, and set to work.

Sonya's lively beautiful eyes raking over the bloody carcase cuts stood out to him especially; they even made him swallow for some reason. Otherwise his saw in front of him her body hooked by the mouth, slit open from the front, so that the bluish respiratory organs are visible coming down from her head tilted back to her lungs; there is some red sticky goop in her hair, and the blood left, running dry already, is trickling down Sonya's legs into a little puddle on the floor.

— Tell me, where around here are the black lakes? — asked Sonya suddenly, and Kolya's heavy body shuddered. He stared dumbly at Sonya, opening his mouth. — I need the black lakes, — Sonya repeated clearly, looking straight into his watery eyes.

Some obscure fear gripped Kolya. He used to think that no one except for him knows about the black lakes, the bottomless holes in the grass of suburban tundra where he shook out from the crate his vile handicrafts made of bones and innards of children he mauled to death; the handicrafts filled with slaughterhouse blood, with which Kolya tried to substitute the blood of the little human beings spilt by him. He believed that the stone towers, covered with black crust standing among the lakes are inhabited by powerful demons that admire his gifts and that will in return give him the powers to become immortal.

— You've been eating human flesh? — asked Sonya with a grim threat in her voice. — Cooking rib broth from children's ribs? Stewing the Year 2 girl's liver with potatoes? Answer, you scum.

Kolya grabbed an axe from the table and threw it at Sonya's head but missed, because Sonya stepped aside; the axe hit the stone wall of the store leaving a fist-size dent in the bricks.

— I'll make navy—style pasta with your brains, — roared Kolya and went at Sonya with a knife, cutting off her way to the exit door that he at once bolted. — With your sweet brains, poppet.

But Sonya did not even think of running away.

— Don't make me ask you again, — she said to Kolya sweetly. — Because I will cripple you or kill you outright.

— My wife Liusia cooked dumplings from a girl a week ago, — Kolya stopped for this reminiscence. — Very nice dumplings, only they are already gone now. And dumplings from you won't be tasty; you're only good for patties. Or for stuffed peppers. The moment I see a particular child, I already know the best dish to cook.

Kolya was about to move further, but missed his chance, because Sonya spent a third of the cat's soul to launch a spout of fire as thick as a tumbler out of her mouth into his stomach; it burned right through him casting a shower of blood and cooked abdominal fat behind his back. Kolya dropped the knife and fell onto the store floor holding his stomach. Scalding bubbling blood mixed with bowel contents started flowing towards his palms, following the exhaust of

stinky steam.

—Ah-ah, — roared Kolya with pain and in fear for his guts.

— Well, where are the lakes? — Sonya repeated her initial question quietly bending over the butcher's distorted face. — I will heal you if you tell me.

— Outside the city... in the fields... by the chemical factory...— Kolya tried to show the direction with his forehead, howling.

— Which cardinal direction? In the north?

Instead of answering Kolya started rolling around, still howling wildly.

— If you face the rising sun, — Sonya uttered slowly. — Where should you go then?

— To the left, — bellowed Kolya. His contorted mush gradually began to turn deathly pale.

— To the north it means.

— Help me, girl... help me, girl... — Kolya whimpered hoarsely tossing his head back in his inhuman pain that was torturing him.

— Of course I will help you since I have promised, — answered Sonya calmly. — Move your hands away.

Kolya hesitantly moved his shaking hands away from the bloody hole in his stomach. His eyes, watering on account of pain, were looking at Sonya plaintively. She weightily stomped his defenceless bleeding stomach. The stomp sent up a fan of bloody spray with a short squelchy sound out of the wet rumpled mess on Kolya's stomach. Kolya grabbed his gut and curled up; his roar shook the walls of the meat store.

— You will croak before nightfall, — concluded Sonya, turning to the door. — No more gobbling human flesh for you.

With these words Sonya drew the bolt, went out into the dark wind that struck her in the face, and turned into an alley at once. A man, one of those standing in the street, followed her, but saw no living soul in the dark alley.

Only late at night Sonya finally reaches the chemical factory, tired

from the long way and her fight with the butcher. It towers amidst dark autumnal fields like a horrendous city of yore, sinking into the depths of ruined time. The stellar sky is thickening above the immense cylinders of gas holders and the ruins of dead plant buildings. Sonya finds a gap in the fence topped with rows of razor wire, and gets into the factory yard. From the bleak buildings it smells of dampness and some acrid gas that makes Sonya's throat itchy. She almost steps onto a dog's corpse lolling around in the middle of the yard, half-sunken into sand, like a dead fish that bobbed up out of the ground. In tilted tanks on rusty stands and in a long three-storey building with smashed windows the lonely wind is howling drearily.

Another building stretches parallel to this one, and across the passage between them Sonya walks out into the central square, on which stands the main process building, huge like a cathedral, fringed with outbuildings; its chimneys soar into the sky. Here the smell intensifies. Sonya perches on a rusty pipe covered with sand, and starts thinking.

While she is thinking, a shadow appears from the main building, and, staying close to the wall, sneaks up on Sonya. This is Alexei, former student of the Vocational technical school №12, who once got into the main process building to test a mass destruction bomb of his own creation, but he stumbled, and fell into the basement through an effluent shaft, flying a shy of thirty-seven metres down the metal well; just like Alice, heading to the Wonderland. Before his terrible crash onto the floor, Alexei saw a gigantic figure of a dead Read Army man riding a gigantic war horse; its stone hooves were pounding the morass of the nocturnal fields. The boy's brain splattered the walls and the floor on considerable distance from where he landed, and no one could lick it off, because even the rats adapted to the factory could not get into the poisoned drainage. The chemical substances that were drained into the dungeon for many years formed a petrified sediment on the floor, reacting with water that was getting down there, thus forming poisonous fumes that filled the whole main process building and blanketed the plant grounds with a faint greenish fog that crawled to the outskirts of the city, often making the suburban women give birth to legless, armless, or even headless children. But on Alexei the poison had a beneficial effect; a few days later he came alive, rose up and wandered the dark drainage labyrinths for long months feeding on rats and insects. Later, he eventually found a rusted door the condemned workers were supposed to go down through to clean the possible clots in the drain system; he got out into the underground level of the main process building and started living there. Alexei killed children that roamed around the industrial edge or pet dogs that

strayed far from their owners during walks; he preserved them in poison and ate little by little. One girl that he had killed with a brick in the springtime, Alexei dragged down to the place of his second birth, and soon she truly did rise; one of her arms though did not work anymore; it dried up and fell off to the mid-forearm, so instead of it they had to wire a piece of bent rusty metal, but it was a doddle for Alexei, so Tanya, that was the girl's name, became the partner of his life. Later Liuba, Tanya's elder sister whom she missed very much, joined them, and then Kostik, Alexei's former friend, so they became a quartet.

While Alexei is creeping up on Sonya, Liuba is gutting the rats, caught in the dungeon, on the second level of the main process building, sitting by a rusty can in which bluish fire is burning, and one-armed Tanya and Kostik went into the fields to find some carrion. Stopping a couple of metres from Sonya, Alexei produces out of his half-decayed jacket a piece of chain with a nut on its end, with which he is going to waste the girl sitting on the pipe. The chain softly jingles in the whistling of the wind, and Sonya turns her head towards the dark line under the wall of the building where Alexei is lurking. In the darkness her eyes emit some strange glow invisible to a regular person; it gives Alexei an uneasy feeling. Great terror suddenly fills him; the terror of some unknown to him, but blood-curdling torture. He cannot imagine who and how will torture him, but that frightens him even more. And then he realises that these are Sonya's thoughts, and he hears them due to his long-term exposure to the poison, just like he heard sometimes the thoughts of the rats, running away from him into the darkness.

Alexei wheezed; the weapon dropped from his hand. The cold enters his putrefied body, like when taking an icy plunge. And he again heard the heavy, earth-shattering steps of the gigantic horse going through the fields, with skulls in his harness. Sonya's eyes are approaching him. He wants to scream, but cannot.

— Hello, Alyosha, — says Sonya. Alexei still continues hearing her thoughts, untranslatable into words; he wants to stop hearing them, but he froze into them and cannot get out. These are the sounds of a foreign language; black dots and lines on a brown fabric; a language that is spoken by creatures whose mother is death. Sonya is smiling, and this smile makes him wince so strongly that black serum starts trickling from his mouth.

— Begone, you vermin, — he says with somebody else's voice, hardly controlling his mouth muscles.

— Easy now, dear Alyosha, — pronounces Sonya gently, touching his hair, all greasy and sticky. — Take it easy and better tell me how you live around here. What you do here in the long cold evenings; who your friends are, dear Alyosha; tell me, I wish to know that necessarily.

— I eat rats, — Alexei squeezes out of himself. — I eat dogs. Dead ones.

— Very good, — Sonya smiles at him. — And who is that girl frying rats upstairs behind the wall?

— Liubka. I wasted her. With the nut. Then she came alive in the shaft. And Tanika I wasted with a brick. And Kostik we wasted together with Tanika with some bricks. Then they came alive in the shaft as well.

— Very good. And who lives there, in that shaft?

— No one, says Alexei, and his blue lips acquire a colour of a plum covered with white mould.

— Very good. Why then do the carcasses come alive down there do you think?

— Who bloody knows.

— Alright, let's go eat rats, — Sonya picks up the nut and gives it to Alexei. — Here, don't forget this.

Shortly after that, Sonya, Alexei and Liuba are sitting on metal floor of the second level in the main process building, a kind of a balcony, throwing little bones over the railing. Liuba has no upper lip because it had rotten away. When talking she presses her lower lip to her upper teeth.

— And then I whacked him on the head with the nut and killed, — Alexei continued telling. — Hadn't he stumbled and fallen, I would have lured him to the underground level and killed him there. It was a big guy.

— We have been gorging him for two weeks, — Liuba ads timidly, sucking a rat bone.

— Then the police arrived, but we lied low in the acid house. No one will ever check the acid house. You'll croak there. Kostik made a

pipe gun and shoots nails with it, and the nails he sticks into the acid house floor. He killed a big dog this way recently. He croaked at once, didn't even howl.

— And Tanika has a poisonous jemmy, — ads Liuba again. — She can throw it very accurately, right in the bonce.

— You live well here, — concludes Sonya, leaning back onto the building wall. — Because you are as thick as thieves.

Silence falls, disturbed only by crunching chomping of the eaters sitting by the fire.

— And who are you, then? — asks Alexei, starting at once to feel unwell for some reason.

— My name is Sonya. I came here from afar to find Lenin.

— And where does this Lenin live? — asks Liuba.

— The path to him lies through the field, above which sun doesn't shine, through the forest of stone and the black lakes.

— The black lakes, that's here, — brightens Liuba. — Here, by the factory. See, in the can, that's their water burning.

— And is there a tower among the lakes?

— And there's a tower too. Jet black, — Liuba finishes her rat and wipes her hands off on her dress. Sonya thoughtfully looks at her dirty bare legs stretched out on the floor.

— Then the first sinister talisman should be buried around here, — tells she in a hollow voice. — K— B—Z—K.

— What is it, then? — Liuba asks quietly, feeling that things look very grim.

— It is a secret. But we must find it, my little friends, — Sonya casts a glance over the kids, motionless in the light of the black water. — We must find it, before the talisman's guardian kills us.

— And who is it, the talisman's guardian? — Alexei joins the conversation. His rotten insides are knotting up. He should have never met Sonya.

— I don't know for sure, — Sonya shrugs her shoulders. — But

someone very strong.

— I saw him, — says Alexei in a hoarse voice. — It's a huge man on a horse. When he rides, the whole earth shudders. He has a flaming sabre in his hand, as big as a poplar.

Sonya closes her eyes, trying not to think about the guardian. A strong gust of draft fans the flame in the metal can. Sonya tenses up.

— It seems that they are on my trail.

— Who? — Alexei looks into the black window opening.

— The vampires, — Sonya answers grimly and takes off her boots without opening her eyes. — We'll have to attack them.

Having sent Liuba out to find Kostik and one-armed Tanya, Sonya and Alexei come out into the square in front of the main process building. Stellar sky covers them; the wind swirls in its vastness, carrying upwards like shadows all sorts of matter torn from the earth. For many long minutes stretched out by the warping of the worlds they are standing motionlessly, the huge bleak building behind them, looking into the sky, a girl and a boy.

— They are here, — finally utters Sonya, not wanting to talk about the eternity. — The fight will be tough.

— Maybe we hide in the acid house? — Alexei suggests hoarsely.

— Why is your voice so raspy then, Alyosha? — Sonya asks solicitously.

— My throat parched from poison, — answers Alexei grimly, rubbing his neck with his dirty hand. — We scoff the poison with meat. To strengthen the body.

At the opposite end of the passage between the warehouse buildings from where Sonya had come the figures of the approaching vampires become visible. Natasha, holding her hook, is at the front; the lame driver is a little behind her wearing a skirt he made himself from an oily rag, with a chunk of metal in his hand and a dented bucket on his head that serves as a helmet for him. Then comes the big bald man with no clothes armed with an axe, and the woman wrapped in the blanket with a half—burned face holding a rusty piece of pipe. The naked boy brings up the rear carrying a cobblestone he picked up by the kerb. The sixth vampire that had been suffering in his guts in the

van is already decaying in a dump pit.

Sonya is waiting for them to get closer, illuminating the space in front of her with a can of black water that she is holding in her hand. Reaching the middle of the passage, Natasha spots Sonya and breaks into a run with hateful roaring. The rest of the vampires try to keep up with their leader.

When Natasha reaches Sonya, Alexei backs away, and Sonya splashes her chest with flaming black water. Natasha's sweater is bursting into flames, and the hook hits the ground near Sonya who managed to jump back. Growling furiously, Natasha starts spinning around and flailing about; some of her blows are knocking whole shards of bricks out of the process building wall. Sonya retreats into the building; the bald roaring man with the axe rushes in behind her. Dodging the blow of the axe, Sonya is running up the echoing metal stairs. The vampire is thundering after her. Whirling around at the turn of the staircase, Sonya opens her hand, and blinding light flares out of it with a sizzle. The body of the bald one stumbles; with fierce roaring he piles on Sonya; both fall down the stairs, but Sonya wriggles out from under the vampire in the air; he plummets onto the concrete surface of the underground level, breaking the railing that separates the ground floor and the pit, and crashes into the bottom. Pulling a tight turn in the air, Sonya descends beside him and picks up the axe that has bounced off to the side. The fall onto the chiselled chest of concrete caused two ribs and arm fracture, so, roaring deeply, the bald one struggles to get up on all fours. That is when Sonya chops, raising the axe over her head with two hands. The back of his bald head gives a crunching sound under the axe blow, and the vampire's body falls to the floor, twitching. With reckless axe blows Sonya breaks the meaty neck, standing in a broad stance for balance.

Going up Sonya listens to the horrible squealing of Natasha rolling around on the ground, consumed by the flaming curse of the poisoned lakes, and to the clatter of metal on metal, accompanied by roaring of the lame driver and muffled growling of Alexei. Separating herself from the dark wall, the split-faced woman slashes with her pipe swiftly like with a scythe, hitting the spot where Sonya's head has just been. The pipe clangs against the wall. Flicking her hand and ducking behind the railing, Sonya slices the woman's gut open, as well as the blanket, with her fiery blade. Dark slop spurts out on Sonya's legs. Swaying, the woman raises the pipe over her head with both hands, and falls face down to the floor dropping her weapon. Unquenchable pain is tearing Sonya's hand apart, so she, wincing, cannot stand up straight for some time to start chopping the long-haired head.

When she finally walks out into the square, Alexei, wounded in his shoulder with a metal piece, is climbing up a stack of rusty pipes towards a broken window, followed by the lame driver with a bucket on his head. The bucket saved the lame one from the swing of the nut twice already, but the boy with the stone failed to dodge it, and fell behind picking out a bone shard out of his head cracked with the nut. The boy had died from a stab wound to his side back in the day; its mark looking like a dark bruise is still visible on his naked body. Sonya gains on the waddling teenager from behind and with a short low rumble hits him on the head with her axe, chopping off a chunk of his hand stuck in his skull. The boy doubles over from the impact and receives a kick into his bruised side that knocks him down to the ground. The slashing whoosh of the axe and the crunch of the occiput smashed with the blade ends the fight.

Alexei's fate is tragic, though. He cannot make it to the window; the lame one reaches his spine with his metal piece, and Alexei rolls down from the stack of pipes breaking his shoulder and knocking his teeth out of his mug. Sonya could have come to his rescue, but Natasha, having finally dealt with fire, covered in charred sweater shreds fused to her flesh under her burnt-through skin, roaring, launches an attack again. Sonya is moving backwards, accumulating the remaining cat energy, but suddenly she hears a sharp war whistle, and the jemmy thrown by one-armed Tanya hits Natasha's head. Natasha is struggling to stay on her feet, lurching sideways. Blood is running down her face.

The driver fails to land his vicious blow on Alexei because he takes a poisoned nail to the chest, loosed by Kostik from his pipe gun. The metal piece, missing Alexei's head, strikes sparks from the rusty pipes. Alexei, crazed with pain, crawls away, struggling to hide in the shadow of the wall, but the second blow to the head reaches him; he writhes on the ground, his face turned up to the sky, and the lame one, bending over, his face winced in pain, ponderously drives the metal piece into his bloodstained mouth, then wrenches it like a jack, tearing the boy's neck apart, so that the blackened roots of Alexei's throat become visible.

Meanwhile Natasha, turning sideways to Sonya, scythes the air with her hook a couple of times and charges at Kostik who hastily loads two nails into his pipe gun. The boy's fingers swollen from the putrefactive liquid cannot handle the spring for a long time, but when Natasha pulls her hook back for the hit on the run, both nails rip through her nose point-blank, and dive deep into her face snapping her head back and spurting upward a dark jellyfish of blood. By inertia the devastating blow of the hook smashes Kostik's head and

breaks his neck; the firm point of the hook tears out a part of his face with a stream of blood, and he crumples up into the mud. Natasha loses her balance and drops to her knees, letting out something like a rasp or a gurgle. Blood is gushing out between the nails sticking out in her face. Natasha is kneeling in the mud for some time, leaning on the hook, and looking at the main process building, seeing the home of her death in it, until Tanya, arriving in the nick of time, hits her twice in the ear with a spanner, and Natasha slumps sideways.

At first, the last vampire standing is limping towards Sonya hesitantly, but seeing his leader's demise, he turns towards the parked van. The swaying figure of the lame driver hardly reaches the middle of the passage between the warehouse buildings, when he starts retching from the poison of the nail stuck in his chest; he topples sideways and sees Sonya approaching him wearily amid the stellar snow, holding the axe in her hand. Her silhouette, lit only by the starts, fades away, blending with the soggy darkness. Gathering his last strength, the lame one crawls towards the car, grabbing the soil and dirty tufts of dead grass growing on the body of the planet inhospitable to him. Sonya reaches him at the gap in the concrete fence, and keeps chopping him with her axe until she manages to knock his bucket off. Then she smashes the lame knight's head.

Exhausted completely, Sonya sits down into the mud beside her enemy's body. She is shivering, and searing pain is tearing at her hand that let out the flame, as if someone was pouring freshly boiled water onto it from a kettle. Her legs, arms and dress are stained with greasy blood of the defeated vampires. She closes her eyes and her face turns completely white, like a doll's. It is dawning.

When the cold sky lights up with pale pink paint of the sunrise, Sonya slowly drags the body of the lame one into the dump pit, digging her heels into the mud, and covers him with sand. She looks sadly at the van with which she cannot do anything, and heads towards the main process building. The boy's and Natasha's bodies are still sprawled across the square. The wind ruffles Natasha's hair, draping it over her bent arm; her hand sunk in the puddle of blood that poured out of the head. Sonya grabs the boy's body by the armpits and drags it into the process building. There she finds both of the girls sitting on the metal floor by Kostik's and Alexei's bodies. Liuba is strewing the laceration on Kostik's face with poison, scooping up handfuls of it from her hem. Kostik is shuddering and wheezing. Tanya is crying silently. The tears, cold like the first raindrops, are running down her unwashed cheeks.

Throwing the boy down through the gap of the railing, Sonya pushes down after him the dead woman wrapped in the blanket. She hears their bodies hit the concrete.

— No matter how much you strew, he won't move, — says Tanya dully, losing her tears, staring blankly at Alexei. — It's all because of you. You cursed louse. You scumbag.

Sonya takes off her dress, tights, and, leaving only her briefs, is looking for a long time at the mutilated face of Alexei who fought for her furiously.

— He's done for, — she says. — But he was fighting like a real hero. The time will come, when dead children shall rise from the earth, and he will be among the first ones. Don't cry over him, Tanya. He has conquered his future. Death has admitted him to the Pioneers. She has the right to do so.

— To what Pioneers now? — asks Tanya, peering into Alexei's face, trying to find familiar features there. Her tears are dropping into the boy's torn mouth.

— Real Pioneers never die, — Sonya approaches Tanya, crouches down beside her and, wrapping arms around her neck, kisses her on the cheek. — They stand guard in the forest of stone, awaiting the bright future. He is standing there already, your Alyosha, wearing a new red tie and rendering a salute.

— Really? — doubts it Tanya, wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

— It's the gospel truth, — Sonya kisses Tanya again and presses her cheek against Tanya's, looking over her shoulder. — When I find the forest of stone, I will see him.

— Then I will go with you, — says Tanya. — I want to get into the forest of stone too.

— But you're not a Pioneer. Only a real Pioneer can enter the forest of stone.

— And you?

— I am a Pioneer. I was admitted to Pioneers, after all. Only my tie is gone, I lost it.

— How do I become a Pioneer now?

— It is difficult now; real communists and Komsomol members are nowhere to be found. No one can admit you to the Pioneers here, except for death.

— Then kill me, you probably can.

— Oh, Tanechka, the death must be heroic. What's the use of me killing you.

Only wheezing of wounded Kostik is heard in the silence that followed.

— Then I'll simply go with you, — says Tanya quietly. — I'll sit by the forest and wait. That will be enough for me.

— Alright, — replies Sonya, having given it some thought. — If you want it so badly, you can come with me. Only this path is a long, and probably a horrifying one.

— I'm not afraid of anything, — says Tanya in a hollow voice.

— Then tell me about the dungeon. Something must be there that makes the dead rise.

— What makes them rise, I don't know. But down there, in the darkness, maybe there is someone besides us.

— I saw it, — says Liuba suddenly. — When we went to poison the nails with Kostik, we saw something moving in the darkness, near the floor, like a dog.

— And what did it look like? — asks Sonya.

— It was very dark there.

— Where was it, do you remember?

— Near the straight passage that leads into the bedroom.

— Leads where?

— We call the bedroom that place where the dead ones are put, — explains Tanya. — Most of the poison ends up there. From there a straight passage with curved walls leads into the dungeon. I remember when we were dragging Liubka down to the bedroom, I felt that

something was moving behind us, but no matter how many times I looked back I saw nothing.

— And Kostik used to say, — Liuba chimes in again, — that something seems to live underground; only it walks on the ceiling, not on the floor, and that he shot at it once, but the nails don't harm it.

— I figured that you have a passage into the depths here, where you shouldn't go, — says Sonya sombrely. — I'll have to find it. They probably know the way to the forest of stone. We need more fire, it is the only thing the underground folk fear. Tanya, let's go get the black water.

Alexei is buried into the ground by the wall of the warehouse. Tanya is not crying anymore. She puts the nut on a chain in his one hand, and a handful of poison in his other one. All four of them are standing over the grave silently; Kostik, healed with the live-giving poison, is holding his hand on his neck.

The girls lug Natasha's body into the dump pit. Natasha is very heavy, so she is leaving a furrow in the mud. Having covered Natasha with earth, Sonya and Tanya are going for water to the nearest lake. It's broad daylight; weak sun is fading away in the damp clouds. The clouds are creeping in from the west, where a solid grey wall of them can be seen on the horizon.

— It's going to rain, — says Tanya, who does not really care about rains. Sonya is silent.

The wind is rippling the viscous surface of the oily water. The lakes are surrounded by a wide belt of tawny-coloured soil, in which grass does not grow. From here a blackened masonry tower is visible across the water. An effluent pipe, covered with a silver wrap, stretches from the lake to the factory. When the factory was still alive, chemical waste was being discharged through it into once regular meadow lakelets, until all life ceased to exist around them; the grass died; the bulrush stopped growing, and the birds stopped nesting. When time vanquished by man ceased to flow in this spot in space, workers of some unknown department erected a black tower in the middle of the field, a silent bastion on the border with eternity.

The dwellers of the nearest city districts preferred to avoid the accursed place. Word was that ugly infants, whose life only lasted within the walls of the nearby maternity hospital, danced in a circle around the tower at night, and that some boy, who was roaming

through the fields on a frosty winter night, saw a bird with long goat horns sitting on the top of the tower and gouging out stones from it with a grinding sound.

Whispers were that someone lived in the black lakes and wept in the field like a child at night; that, however, was almost the pure truth, because a girl named Liza lived in one of the lakes; an unknown man had raped her in a back alley, strangled her and cut her navel out; then he took her body to the lake by car and dumped her there with a lorry wheel on her neck. Liza liked living in the pitch-black water, even more so because she did not need to breathe anymore; as the weather turned cold, she crawled into the nest she made in an underwater burrow; in warm weather she fed on grasshoppers and sleeping birds collected at night, and having had her fill, she did not cry, but she sang by her lake, especially at full moon, and this ethereal maidenly singing about the beauty of the dark spaces, submerged into the abyss, full of chilliness, scent of flowers and stars, ignorant people mistook for the weeping of a forlorn soul. The absence of her own navel felt especially romantic to Liza, causing her to be certain of her eternal

existence before and after death.

Coming for water, Sonya immediately senses Liza's existence by her faint, week-old prints on the soil and by the specific odour. She lies down on her stomach, face to the water, and starts looking into the depth of the lake, hissing quietly. Tanya is glancing at her fearfully, scooping the flammable water with a can. Shortly after that, a glowing spot appears in the dark depth of the lake, and Liza comes to the surface soundlessly, spitting the black water out of her chest. It is obvious that during her life, when the deathly pallor had not yet touched her face, she could not count on her present beauty.

— Excuse me, Liza, — starts Sonya humbly, going from prone to her heels, — for disturbing your sleep. But, you see, it can be so pleasant to talk to someone who can understand and console you. Are you a Komsomol girl, Liza, by any chance?

Liza's off—white eyes express an evanescent anxiety. She is just about to recede back to her burrow, when an almost faded memory of pain that probably still resides in future makes her smile bitterly.

— No, little miss, not anymore; I ceased being a Komsomol girl when Komsomol ceased to exist, — she suddenly replies in a melodious voice.

— That's a pity, otherwise you could help the poor little girl... — Sonya motions with her eyes towards Tanya who is snarling at the mermaid, fearfully and nastily, holding the bucket against her chest with her metal hand, — ...who craves to become a Pioneer. Believe me, she is a good girl, and if she went to school, she'd be a straight—A student and a young activist.

—Ahh, all that is in the past, luv, — Liza sweeps her graceful balletic arm in water. — All that is dead.

— Oh, please... what's your name?

— Liza.

— What beautiful name you have. Now, Liza, just consider it for a moment; can something enormous... — Sonya spreads her arms wide, as if she wanted to represent the sun, — ...something so big and full of life just suddenly die, vanish without trace? You see, Liza, we are tiny compared to Komsomol, you and me, but even we cannot disappear; we both do exist, don't we, dear Liza. Something that so many people believed in cannot die; it doesn't matter if they crave for it, as they used to, or not. Put a scarecrow in the field and it will come alive. And Komsomol is not a scarecrow, Liza, it is something much much bigger. Have you read “The Young Guard”?

— Yes, I have, — answers Liza, flooded with unintentional memories about the days of her former life, about the cherry trees blooming in front of her school in May, about the stuffy reading room of the library, where silence full of a fly's buzzing had settled, about the ticking of her grandma's clock above the bookshelf, about the sleepy flight of the moth from the wardrobe to the hallway and about the chilly breeze that would meet her bike on the shaded incline leading into her courtyard.

— So, can all this perish, dear Liza? In a world where everything happens for a reason. It means that it still lives, exists, and only needs to be found.

— You might be right, little miss, — agrees Liza. — But I don't want to go back into the beautiful past, even if it becomes the future. I like the twilight and the sepulchral chill of the present, its fading streetlights, decaying leaves and the hopeless sadness of the night. I like the loneliness.

— And I'm drawn to the luminous mystery of the crimson stars, — sighs Sonya. — I want to become an enchantress.

— You will probably die, brave little miss, — says Liza spellbound. — I like your fate.

Silence follows. Each one is thinking their own thoughts, and Tanya, holding the bucket, is thinking about fate.

— I should probably swim back now, — says Liza. — It's turned really cold; my shoulders are freezing above the water.

— Have you ever noticed anything unusual here, around your lakes, Liza? — asks Sonya, and her face becomes serious. — Doesn't anything surprise you?

— Except maybe the light above the grove, — answers Liza after a moment of contemplation. — I don't know where it comes from. If you climb the hill on a cloudy night, then, up north, where the forest begins, you see a white glow, so faint, that the living ones who see poorly in the dark cannot discern it. But I see it. I guess, something is glowing in the forest

— Thank you, Liza. It seems to be what I'm looking for. The light above the grove.

— Aren't you afraid to live here, — Tanya asks the mermaid. — What if anyone throws fire in the water?

— Down there, under the water, the fire cannot live, little miss; nothing can live down there, only me. Down there, at the bottom, there are very many traces of those who came before me, but they are all dead. Farewell, — Liza turns around and descends into the blackness with powerful strokes and kicks. Tanya is gazing after her, while Sonya is washing her arms and legs in the lake, thoroughly washing away the bloodstains from her skin. On their way back to the factory, she looks back to the north one time.

— So does the forest really begin up there? — she asks Tanya.

— Yes. It's really close, but in the lowland, so it's not visible from here. We often catch mice there. But I never noticed there any glow.

— We'll have to wait until nightfall anyway if we want to see it.

— Sonya... — asks Tanya after a long silence, — why does fire appear out of your hand?

— I sucked the heart of a cat dry, — answers Sonya. — But now it

has worn off already.

— Can I do that too?

— No, I don't think so. You're different.

When they approach the factory, the rain begins.

The First Sinister Talisman

And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire

Rev. 15:2

...; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee...

Rev. 3:9

— From here I'm going on alone. Go away.

Sonya is standing in a wall of a small underground reservoir with a low ceiling; a hole gapes in the wall; its edges had been smoothed-over by tons of effluent. In her hand she is holding a tin bucket with burning oily water. She is wearing trousers, a checkered shirt and a little jacket, which Tanya had issued her from the marauder's cache of the little factory dwellers.

—There, behind the hole, will be a pipe going down, then straight, and then it forks, — says Tanya quietly. — A lot of rats come from there.

— Farewell, Tanya. If I'm not back by evening, then I stayed there forever, — says Sonya unpretentiously and descends into eternal darkness.

Tanya is standing and watching the reflection of the flaming bucket fade underground. Then she walks back to the opposite wall, sits on the floor, leaning against it, and starts waiting, looking with her sleepless eyes into the hole where Sonya has gone. She is thinking about the forest of stone that reflects the clouds drifting across the sky with its mirror-like trunks. She is thinking about Alexei who is

standing his Pioneer watch amid the unmelting snow. Love, huge and indestructible, like a mountain, fills her small one-handed being. A love for someone she had never known during her life, for someone who killed her and made her live again against her will, maimed and full of hatred; a love that knows no reason and no end, like the cosmos washing the flaming shores of the solar star.

Sonya is wandering through the pipes for a long time, descending deeper into the earthen abyss. She finds narrow crawl spaces she cannot get into, access hatches in the crown of the pipes, seized with rust, and browned skeletons of the workers wearing decayed boiler suits; the victims of a far-off maintenance disaster, when an alkaline river gushed out of the burst effluent lines with a rustling howl, ruthlessly stealing the air from its creators vainly clinging to the manhole steps inside the pipes. Here, in the depths of space, lost by man again, the wind returneth again according to his circuits; day and night do not alternate anymore; time is measured only by the generations of rats, the remains of which, mixed with sand, build up in the dried-out metal river beds of the pipes.

Sonya navigates by smell, by the terrifying smell of the world untouched by man; although it existed long before humans, and will still exist after the last human dies. The smell is scattered across the whole effluent system, and Sonya returns to the same spots several times marking the brownish walls with a piece of yellow brick. Finally, she finds an access hatch in a pipe wall; a tiny ladder behind it goes down into a small chamber. A mouth of a well with manhole steps inside gapes in the bottom of the chamber. Sonya puts the bucket on the floor of the chamber, kneels and breathes from the well. The smell comes from down there.

Hooking the bucket over her forearm and peering into the darkness below, Sonya goes down the rusted manhole steps carefully, hand over hand. She suddenly sees the reflection of her fire in the underground river flowing down below. The well abruptly ends above a low-level bridge of metal. The river does not belong to the work of men's hands; the riverbed walls consist of regular brown clay with traces of crumbling. A couple of metres upstream Sonya sees a mudbank formed by clay washed out from the wall. Reaching down with her leg, Sonya makes sure that the river is barely above her knee; she gets down from the bridge into the water and goes along the silty bottom against the weak current. Having reached the mudbank, she notices them.

They are standing on the wall horizontally, as if they were lying in

the air. There are two of them. They are no taller than Sonya. Their white mold-coloured faces are covered with skin growths inciting some strange terror. Their heads are covered with black spines instead of hair. Their narrow black eyes are devoid of iris and do not reflect fire, like matt plastic. They look more like work of taxidermy than living beings. A sharp headache indicates for Sonya the start of telepathic contact with the underground folk unable to speak.

The underground folk express disdain for Sonya's folly that brought her here, because Sonya's existence here is impossible, due to the multitude of ceased existences of the individuals belonging to Sonya's species here. Sonya's demise is imminent, and she, failing to understand this fact, deserves disdain. Sonya's demise is imminent.

The way to the forest of stone, Sonya replies to them silently. The way to the forest of stone.

The incomprehension of Sonya's intention to move towards the forest of stone comes up against the domain of her inner being which is beyond the range of cerebral vision of the underground folk. The unhumans subject Sonya to a sudden telepathic attack, making her sit down on sand in a daze; she closes her eyes and tries to remember where she is. Some of the burning liquid is trickling down into the river from the tilted bucket and goes out quickly. Coming to her senses, Sonya sees that the unhumans have approached her; she really wants to splash some fire on them, but she does not do it. They immediately try to kill Sonya by shredding her brain, but they cannot. Then they understand that Sonya is not a human.

Who are you. You resemble neither the living ones, nor those who walk after death. Tell us who you are.

The way to the forest of stone, Sonya replies to them silently. Do you know about it.

We know about it. Tell us who you are.

Sonya closes her eyes with her hand and opens her being to the unhumans.

Their horrible faces contort in fear.

What is scaring you, asks Sonya, and a black ball of yarn is slowly unwinding inside her.

The unhumans are desperately trying to kill Sonya. Their tongueless

mouths open, emitting sharp screeching. Icy diamond screws thrust into Sonya's head; blood is coming out of her mouth, but she already starts uttering something she does not know herself. The underground folk drop onto the mudbank and start crawling to their burrow. The icy screws shatter into snow dust.

Let us go, mistress.

The forest of stone, Sonya repeats the question. The forest of stone.

A field with rotting haystacks instantly appears before her eyes; a lonely tree by the stubble's edge and an abandoned tractor.

Let us go, mistress.

Sonya spits blood, and the death throes of the unhumans tear the skin on her right hand that is covering her eyes. Silence falls.

Dragging her leaden feet, Sonya returns back without looking at the spot where the corpses of the underground beings remained. She knows what is happening to them now, but she does not want to see it. She is struggling to climb the rungs up the well; she stops to rest several times, pressing her chest against the step irons and closing her eyes.

Sonya appears from the wall opening towards evening; Tanya is still sitting opposite it. Her face is etched with fatigue; the water is hardly burning at the bottom of the bucket. The girls are holding each other; Sonya's fingers let go of the bucket and it clatters to the floor.

Sinking to the metal floor by the fire, where the rats Liuba caught are roasting merrily, Sonya sinks into sleep, full of entwined branches, between which spherical stars of pale flowers are floating, covered with icy down of the unquenchable flame.

Late in the evening Sonya and Tanya set out. The drizzle is stinging their faces in the darkness. The dogs, dying, some of cold and some of hunger, are howling in the invisible hamlets. In the gloom, not lit even by the starts, Sonya clearly sees a glow in the distance, the one Liza talked about, looking like light of a thin crescent fallen into a deep forest ravine. The wayfarers skirt Liza's lake and climb up a gentle hill, from where a strip of forest across the field is visible. Sonya is peering into the darkness, and nobody knows what she sees there.

Finally, she begins walking down the hill; gravel is biting her bare

feet. Her boots, comfortable only for walking on hard surfaces, Sonya gave to Liuba, and in return she received a straight razor Liuba had once found in a scrapyard, which is now in Sonya's jacket pocket, neatly wrapped in a cloth. Sonya likes the razor very much, for she had always dreamed about such a razor; with a contoured handle and a sharp blade, slightly covered with rust looking like dried blood. Such a razor cuts well, leaving thin lines of sharp pain with its cool blade. Yes, Sonya prefers to kill quickly and brutally. It must be remembered that her mentors, life and death, are also rough, like the tradeswomen selling children's liver.

Squinting against the nasty rain, the girls plunge into the forest, one that erases memories about cardinal directions and location of the towns nearby in every human who enters it. Their faces plunge into the sea of dankness; they start absorbing the smells of rotting grasses, wet bark and rotten heartwood of the fallen trunks. Like little fairies they are skimming along a narrow path winding through the trees in the darkness; lonely and estranged from the whole world, not expecting any help, compassion or love from it.

The whitish glow brightens ahead, like a shard of a distant dawn, and, approaching the talisman, Sonya feels awe mixed with a cold shiver of fear. She does not even try to imagine what it looks like, and what she will do with it when she finds it, she simply decides to see it and maybe vanish forever. To touch this pure light with the moist surface of your eyes, to feel the transparent flame of freedom start licking your heart affectionately. Oh, no one knows, how beautiful the future is; the future that probably will never come... And Sonya is also thinking about the guardian. About the huge cavalryman on a black horse. About the red star shining on his budyonovka. About the merciless look of his eternal eyes. About the flaming sabre cleaving the nocturnal worlds asunder.

Sonya checks Tanya with a touch. She suddenly sees a little glade with a tree growing in the middle. A phantom light is glowing in its crown.

Sonya is cautiously inhaling the autumnal air and listening closely to the murmur of the rain. A smell of death is wafting from somewhere. Probably, a wood mouse croaked in its burrow. But maybe he is here already? Sonya keeps still. Raindrops are trickling down her face like drops of cold sweat. Pressing herself against a trunk, Sonya seems to merge with it, turning into a forest dweller; she is feeling the worms moving deep in the soil, the squirrel breathing, curled up in its hollow, the raindrops pattering on the branches, the

hissing decay of the soggy fallen leaves. But nothing more. Still, something is worrying her. She presses Tanya's shoulder with her hand, and she sits on her heels in the grass. Then Sonya starts sneaking towards the tree treading very carefully. Halfway there she stops again, because the smell suddenly becomes pungent. Too much for a mouse. Sonya is closely scanning through the bushes from where the smell is leaking. And finally she sees.

— Halt, — a hoarse voice utters quietly, the moment Sonya tries to step back. — Hands up. I'll drop you.

Two shadows rise from the bushes. Now Sonya hears their heavy breathing clearly. Meaning they were not breathing before. She raises her hands meekly.

— Forward, — orders the same voice. Sonya is walking forward, getting out on the glade. She hears one of them follow her. His steps are almost soundless. Then a sharp rustle comes from behind her back where Tanya stayed. A gunshot tears the quietude's mouth. The second one hits her in the eyes. The third and the fourth one fill her with salty blood, oozing from her gums. The second foe, still standing in the bushes, is swearing. A barrel of a sawn-off shotgun pokes into Sonya's back.

— Who was with you? — the hoarse voice asks.

— A girl friend.

— What were you doing in the forest?

— We got lost. Wanted to take a shortcut, — lies Sonya.

— Jacket off.

Sonya takes off her jacket.

— Face me.

Sonya turns around. A stocky man with shaggy beard and matted hair stands in front of her with a sawn-off shotgun in his hands. He is wearing a worn soldier's quilted jacket and a ushanka with a star cockade. By the stink Sonya can tell that the situation is dire. The second man wearing a brown trench coat comes out of the bushes. He has got a pistol in his hand.

— The bitch slipped away, — he says. His voice is not as hoarse; his

face is stubbly and puffy, and he is a bit taller than the first one. — Wow, what a doll. Let's just simply finish her here by the oak, Owl, no trial needed. Right into her nape.

— Shut up. There, see this stump, go shoot it if you're so keen. And this scum should face justice.

— Face justice for what, Owl? She's a minor. A small fry, you see? A pop to the nape and it's done. And only brains will spurt out.

— A minor? I've been working at a factory in her age, — the bearded one rattles evilly. — And she defected to the enemy.

— So what, do we bring her to the lair then?

— We bring her to the RV, then we'll see.

The tall one spits into the grass with frustration.

— Let's go then, dammit. Or soon the second one will bring the polizei here.

The bearded one wrenches Sonya's arms behind her back painfully and ties them up with a belt. They set off. First goes the tall one; captive Sonya follows him, and then goes the bearded one, pushing Sonya now and then with the barrel of the sawn-off. The rain is falling from above incessantly, and Sonya is crying silent tears from her weary helplessness before fate.

Time had stopped for them one sunny summer morning half a century ago. There were eleven of them; they had been fighting as partisans for two months already, but they had a body count of only two Hiwis, killed in the forest, and one soldier of a German punitive brigade who had died in a firefight. They were surrounded near a forest stream where they had encamped; the Germans were many, and ammo was very scarce. Eight of them fell in battle, and three of them, wounded, were taken captive. The captives were hanged at the edge of a village, unknown to them, with signs on their chests; the killed were laid out in a row under their feet, and after that they have been rotting and stinking for two hot summer days, until the occupation sanitary commission deemed further intimidation of the rural population inexpedient. Then they were tossed into a cart and buried in a ditch that the villagers had dug out in the forest near a swamp.

The new order carried out the operation with their usual thoroughness, save for one exception: the place, chosen for the burial,

was eerie. That place had long been a place of ill repute in those parts; word was that children disappeared there, and that it was home for different unholy bog creatures. Seven months passed, and one snowy February night eleven partisans got out of the grave and through flying snow saw the black sky above them once again. The Germans were nowhere to be seen; they had retreated way back in autumn, but the dead partisans could not believe it, and figured that the enemy had established a firm grip and advanced further eastward. The fascists even let the civilians display red banners, as a propaganda stunt, but all factories were by then working for Germany; the children were learning German, and no one even contemplated resistance. Only the eleven partisans continued their valiant war against the odious occupants.

They found weapons on abandoned battlefields. They were attacking the truck parks and stealing fuel, from which they were then crafting bombs. They were nomadising across the forests, and no one could stop their permanent gory raid. They were surrounded several times, but broke out due to their ability to turn into beasts and because bullets could not harm them. They showed no mercy to the traitors, trying them by their partisan tribunal, changing only the method of execution from time to time. Most of the times they were hanging, drowning, strangling, quartering, beheading them, breaking their backs, flaying, ripping them apart by bent trees, boiling or roasting them alive, and in some cases, they even topped that. Sparing the ammo, they did not execute by shooting often, although it has become less of an issue lately. The captives were also usually tortured in order to extract information about enemy concentration areas, timelines of upcoming punitive raids, the political state of global fascism and the names of active adherents of the new order. Apart from exterminating the population defected to the invaders, the partisans also wrecked and ruined everything they came across and everything that, in their view, mattered anyhow to the enemy thriving in unreachable Germany. They were blowing up the railway tracks and derailing the trains. They were sabotaging the power stations and destroying the gas pipelines. They were seizing and destroying long-distance vehicles, and even planes crashed twice due to them. They lost only two over the course of their long way. One of them, known as Pike, died in a fierce battle with classified internal fascist security forces thirty years ago after a hand grenade exploded right under his feet. The second one, former squad leader named Ignat and known as Desman, disappeared in the raging flame of a heating plant set on fire by him, and his comrades still considered him simply missing. Now Mitya was commander of the squad. He was usually called Bear,

because he could turn into this big and dangerous beast out of specific malice, unlike his comrades, who were bog-standard volkolaks.

The one that was walking in front of Sonya had been very young back on that far-off summer morning of their last battle; he had just turned nineteen. He was called Shaggy in the squad, although his real name was Leonid. He did not like faffing around and preferred to eliminate the enemy blindly, in one fell swoop; he did not accept tortures, considering them a waste of time, besides, the screams of pain made him feel sick and sleepy. Being sometimes alone, he used to kill the fascists right away, without reporting to the commander, for what severe reprimands were often issued to him, but he could not be punished because every soldier counted. The second one was called Owl because he never slept and liked eating roasted mice. Apart from that, Owl liked choking fascist children with his hands, boys especially, although he did not disdain girls too much either. One time he and Shaggy pounced on a Year 2 class that was walking in the forest, and he throttled six children instantly, right on the glade, while Shaggy was stripping the dresses off the two young hanged fascist female teachers, just like wet paper, to expose to the pupils the full shame of their base betrayal, and to explain to them who their real enemy was. The rest of the children, except for one beautiful fascist girl Shaggy raped brutally in the bushes and killed, were let go in the hope that at least one of them would grow up to be a new partisan.

Sonya has been walking between the partisans for about half an hour, her feet all scratched up by bushes hidden in the darkness. What disgusted her most was that she ended up not seeing the sinister talisman, and she had lost almost all hope to see it in the future. Turning her head at some point, she attempted to speak to Owl who appeared quicker on the uptake than his grim fellow, but received a hard poke in her back with the barrel that made her stumble and fall, after what Owl dragged her up by her hair.

— I'll kill you, scum, — he reminded Sonya grimly, baring his yellowish wolf fangs. She did not attempt to talk anymore and was simply walking forward silently. Sonya does not doubt that they want to torture her with their partisan tribunal a little and then execute her, she is only afraid that they might choose an inappropriate method. Shooting, if not in the head, let alone hanging, do not scare Sonya. But the frowning furred faces of the partisans hint at such a drive for ingenuity and innovation, that she is getting uneasy.

Soon behind the shroud of rain a lazy river sound is heard. An unlit forester's cabin stands on its bank overgrown with sedge and weeping

willows. Two more partisans are sitting at its doorstep and eating dried fish, cutting it by hunting knives. Seeing their comrades-in-arms, they keep eating and just give them a listless look. The one, sitting to the left of Sonya, is called Pavel, or simply Sack; he is fat and ugly, and his bloated gut grunts and purrs grossly all the time. An AK rifle is leaning against his knee with the butt on the ground; his boots have fallen apart; stalks of grass are sticking out of them. He is wearing a tracksuit that is way too small for him, and a jacket. Sack is famous among the partisans for his lust, focused solely on animals, with which he does not at all strive to have sexual intercourse, because his genitals have rotten away long ago, but he plays with them for a long time, groping the cherished mite with his paws and kissing it with his blubber lips, until he chokes it or breaks its neck. The animals, unaware of their fate, love Sack too, and a squirrel, a hedgehog, and even a fox can sometimes be seen running after him down the path. The name of the second partisan, sitting to the right, is Volodya, but he is called Swede, probably because of the strange shape of his head, that does not at all look like a swede though, but more like a heel of seeded rye bread, with his chin and forehead jutting out so prominently out of his pockmarked mush covered with freckles and pimples. An assault rifle is also hanging behind Volodya's back, and on his belt three grenades and a steel water bottle are visible. He is in civvies, but wearing military tarpaulin boots.

— Hiya, — spits Shaggy to the ones sitting, sits down onto the cabin's doorstep and tries a piece of dried fish. — Yuck, proper bitter.

— Come on Shaggy, that's not fair, — argues Sack with a priestly drawl and distinct "O"s. — The fish is lovely. So where did you find the girl?

— Caught her near the city. I offered to shoot her at once, but Owl wants to try her.

— Good call, — Swede joins the conversation with his goofy voice. — The trial is a must. What if she's not guilty? — and he smiles, baring his gapped flat teeth, like all idiots have.

— She's guilty, this bitch, — hisses Owl, and, taking Sonya gently by her hair, unties the straps on her arms. — Strip, you fascist scum; we'll torture you with matches.

— We'll shove wire into your ears, — beams Swede. — You'll tell us everything; you'll start speaking German.

— Why torture me, — says Sonya. — I'll tell you everything anyway. I know where the biological weapons depots of the fascists are. And I can't speak German, because I'm a low achiever at school.

— What weapons? — Sack gurgles hoarsely and confusedly.

— The fascists have invented a new kind of weapon, — explains Sonya patiently. — a biological one. People get infected with different diseases from it. With cholera or some mumps for example. The fascists pack this weapon into their shells, and the germs then crawl out of them.

— Cor blimey, — Sack flaps his hand as if shooing these words away, and a small whirlpool is working in his gut for some time, after what he burps loudly.

— So how do you know all this, scum? — Owl hisses suspiciously.

— We learn this at school, to get used to the fascist way of war. And we, as fascist children, have been immunised against all these terrible diseases since childhood. If you want, I can sneak you to the contaminated depots where tubs are teeming with bacteria.

— I don't believe her, says Shaggy, looking askance at his fellows. — It's all lies.

— Yes, something fishy, — agrees Owl. — And maybe it's just a trap.

— It surely is a trap, — Shaggy exclaims happily. — Very tricky, — he spits hard onto the ground even with some admiration for the fascist design.

— But why, why don't you believe me, — Sonya starts crying; her face swells up; tears start pouring out of her eyes; she is rubbing her eyes with her hands and sobbing.

Owl is gripping Sonya by her elbows, while Swede is taking off her clothes. Then they put her flat on the damp ground and Owl, pinning Sonya down with his weight, starts burning her with matches. The fire flares up, Illuming the beast-like faces of the partisans. Sonya is thrashing about and screaming like a stuck pig. Shaggy pulls the belt out of his trousers and lashes Sonya with the belt buckle, letting it rip, aiming for her liver. Sonya is in a lot of pain; she is wailing, trying to protect herself with her legs. Then the partisans have rest; they are chewing on fish, having hobbled Sonya with Shaggy's belt. The

raindrops are hissing against the match burns on her body. Her stomach is covered with scuffed bruises and lacerations left by the belt buckle. Sonya's face is contorted with constant crying.

— Well, what do you say, fascist scum? Will you tell the truth? — Owl bends over her. Speech whistles out of his throat, like steam from under the pot lid. He unties the belt, and Sonya tries to cover her face with her hands, but he grabs her wrists firmly.

Sonya is nodding rapidly.

— I told you the truth, — she whines, choking on tears. — I don't know anything else.

— Let's shove wire into her ear, — offers Swede. — Or into her nose.

— Proper, — Owl starts holding Sonya down again. Sonya is twitching her head, but the partisan grabs her chin with his iron grip and shoves wire into her nose. — Answer, scum, — he hisses to Sonya wheezily.

— Deeper, —squeals Swede. — Shove it deeper!

Sonya shrieks at top of her lungs, feeling the cold drizzle of rain on her hard palate and blood flooding her throat. Owl takes out the wire and delicately, like a tooth doctor, tilts Sonya's head to the side, to shove it into her ear. Blood is running out of Sonya's nose.

At this moment Tanya appears out of the forest, holding against her chest a little house with a hole instead of the door.

Tanya's story after her parting with Sonya is simple. The moment she saw the partisans, she took to her heels, and only one of four Shaggy's shots reached its target, hitting her back between her shoulder blades. Hiding in the bushes, she pried the bullet out with a sharp twig, and returned to the site of the attack. Both Sonya and the partisans were already gone; only the rain was rustling, and a half-rotten nest box was glowing softly on the tree. Driving her left metal arm into the trunk like a claw, Tanya crawled up on the tree and ripped the nest box with its nails out of the wet rotted bark. The nest box was very old, and the small boards of its roof had warped and pulled the nails out of its walls. Despite her curiosity and hunger, Tanya did not dare to open the nest box with the remnants of an old nest sticking out reeking of carrion; she simply carried it along Sonya's tracks. Watching her girl friend suffering out of the bushes, Tanya got

scared that Sonya would perish from the wire in her ear, and decided to come out. She believed that the sinister talisman is truly inside the nest box and that if it is let out, some sinister thing would happen; something that could possibly help Sonya. So when Shaggy and Swede took aim at her, Tanya simply smashed the nest box against a stump near her feet, and it shattered into pieces. But Tanya saw nothing on the stump; nothing apart from small boards, some rubbish, and pieces of the nest made of twigs, feathers and animal hair, that fell apart.

The partisans are gawking at the girl with the metal arm that smashed the nest box against the stump. Through the rustling of the raindrops, there is a sound of Sonya's muffled sobbing and low rumbling in Sack's stomach. Owl pushes himself up from the girl's tormented body, still holding the bloody piece of wire in his fingers. And then everyone feels a terrible stench; such a stench as if decomposing carcases of elephants were lying all over the forest.

Sonya, lying on her back with her eyes turned heavenward, notices Him first. He is about a hundred metres tall, and the star on his budyonovka is shining like on the tower of the Kremlin. Along the neck of His black horse, standing knee-deep in the nocturnal trees, a fiery mane is ablaze with leaping flames. Sonya sees the huge and livid bare feet in the stirrups and hundreds of human skulls as decoration on the harness. Sonya sees the saddle made from the skin of a killed angel, and the lightning-charred faded tunic. She sees him raising the flaming sabre — a burning poplar.

— No! — yells Sonya, but the slashing strike of flame has already hit the river bank through the dark tree canopies, sweeping away everything in its path. The trunks are collapsing; their tops are falling down wrapped in crackling flames from the unquenchable Red Army man's blade. A wave of fire sweeps poor Tanya away and carries her through the air, like a moth set alight by a candle. She cannot even let out a scream and disappears without a trace, suddenly flickering out, like a fraction of an empty firework rocket.

Howling in a frenzy, the partisans take to their heels, ripping their clothes off on the run and turning into wolves. Only Sack, who is too fat to flee, is not running; instead of that he is pounding away from his assault rifle at the Red Army man that has already straightened up in the saddle. Lines of hissing tracer fire stretch into the black height. The guardian is drawing his arm behind his back, and the next strike of the flaming sabre, taking Sack's squealing head in passing, sweeps away a part of the cabin's roof and passes low over the river touching the water with a whirl of hot flame. The cabin bursts into flames like a

matchbox; the remaining piece of the roof crumbles inside with a loud crunch, and a bank of mist is rising upward from the river. The headless body of the fat partisan, standing against the fiery background and spouting a fountain of brown blood with its neck towards the raindrops, like a goose that has just been beheaded, is dispersing the last rounds in the sky where no one can ever find them anymore, and falls back heavily only when the assault rifle viciously snaps its tooth at nothing.

The rest of the werewolves are rushing along the riverbank, glancing back fearfully, but the huge cavalryman is gaining on them at a slow trot, so they turn sharply and plunge into the water. In the spectral fire of the burning cabin, it is difficult to establish their half-bestial identities diving into the water frantically, desperate to reach the opposite bank. The guardian's horse steps cautiously into the water with un-equine wheezing, and, leaning in with his whole body, the Red Army man deals one blow to the water with his sabre. The river boils, evaporating on its slow course; the choking volkolaks are diving deeper, but croak from the boiling water rushing into their throats, never reaching the desired chill of the bottom silt. When the mist clears, their bloated boiled corpses become visible borne northwards by the stream.

While the massacre is taking place, Sonya, spitting the blood that is trickling down her nasopharynx, is crawling towards the stump on her back pushing the wet ground with her legs. She is barely lucid because of the stomach ache; she is driven by a single desire: to see the sinister talisman before her death. But when the black statue of the cavalryman covers the black sky above her, Sonya stops crawling and is weeping silently, without any hysterics, from the helplessness and futility of her fate. Everything has been futile from the very beginning. She would never manage to overcome Him.

He looks at Sonya lying prone. His dead face does not express feelings. Through her tears Sonya sees that His bluish-black hand, holding the reins, is passing over the tunic covered in charred holes left by lightning strikes. And then Sonya hears His voice in her head, hoarse and thick, coming from everywhere, as if the earth itself was speaking.

You have come. I have waited long for you.

Sonya's heart stops, and the blood ceases trickling down her throat. The cold, moisture-laden air, enters her chest easily.

Fire signs on your body too. The prophecy is fulfilled.

The flaming sabre disappears in the infernal sheath. The demon's eyes look into Sonya's, and she sees eternal serenity in them, like in the hibernal sky full of stars.

Now it is your turn. Now you must guard it.

He starts slowly dissolving in the sheets of rain. The mane of His horse goes out. A few minutes later He is no more, as though He had never been. Sonya fades into insensible darkness, where dead birds are singing with voices sounding not at all like avian.

She comes back when it is still night. The rain-drenched cabin is bleeding bitter smoke into the dark. Not far away charred trees are visible; some trunks are still smouldering mysteriously. Shaking the dirt off her back, Sonya gets dressed, wincing in pain that the clothes are causing. She sees the spot where the sinister talisman that flew out of the nest box lies, gleaming in the grass like foxfire, but she does not hurry. Something arose in her; something she has not known before. She thinks that maybe she has been dead again. Genuinely dead, not like after the brick that the construction workers threw into her head. Genuinely dead, like back in that distant summer of her Pioneer camp, when the section leader Pyotr opened the gates to hell for her with a bash of a black cliff.

Oh, terrifying Pyotr; his curly dark hair and his hands with long slender fingers, his unsolved sidelong glance and husky voice; faint smell of tobacco on his boxy short-sleeved white shirt; his laughing tanned friends, the leaders of the next sections. Sonya and her girl friend Dasha were drinking dark red Crimean wine with them, puffing on small, ragged roll-ups filled with rank weed, watching pornographic prints and giving themselves to the section leaders in the stifling darkness of the staff quarters where the clock was ticking loudly, measuring the time remaining before the morning bugle. Drunken Dasha was always carried away by Igor, the leader of the section “Zarya”, into his room, and Sonya stayed with the rest of them and let them have their way with her, even going far beyond what was shown in the prints. Doing this, the adults went wild, not able to enjoy it in a human way anymore; they tortured Sonya, and she thought that it was the order of things in their terrifying world, so she endured it meekly, although she liked only Pyotr; his kisses burned her, like the stars falling from the aestival sky. She liked it when Pyotr, pinning her to the bed so she could not move, was pounding against her with his whole body, long and fiercely, kissing her brow

damp with the night heat from time to time, and Sonya, alongside pain, felt the satanic power living in his underdeveloped body; she drifted into a near-faint and was flying low over the heavenly meadows, almost touching the flaming ethereal flowers with her face.

And when the camp session came to an end, Pyotr asked Sonya to take a secret goodbye stroll with him to the seashore. It was a limpid sunny morning; they were walking barefoot on the sand smoothed by the surf, and Sonya knew that Pyotr would say something very important to her, something that can even change her entire life. Leaning with his back against a black waterworn cliff, Pyotr was smoking for a long time, and Sonya was gathering shells to bring them home to her mum. Finally Pyotr told Sonya to approach him. She approached him sweeping away strands of hair the breeze blew across her face, having left the gathered shells in a pile on the sand. He embraced her and held her close to his chest, kissed her brow, and then, grabbing her firmly by her hair, hit her head against the cliff with all his strength. He hit her second time, but Sonya did not remember that, having fallen into the grass burning with eternal flame after the first hit.

Dressed, Sonya washes her tear-stained face in the icy river. Then she returns to the stump and picks up the sinister talisman from the grass. It is stinging innocuously in her hand, shimmering with its ruby metallic surface and delicate gold relief. The Komsomol badge of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya.

A warm flickering light pervades Sonya, healing the pain that still lives inside her. She presses the badge against her lips.

— You do love me, — Sonya utters fondly, breathing at the gold profile. — You do love me, Lenin. And I'm a Komsomol girl now.

Having pinned the badge to her shirt at the chest, Sonya enters the charred cabin, where the rain no longer stopped by the roof is freely falling; she lies down on a bench and, closing her eyes under the rain, is thinking about Zoya, a dark-haired girl from a Moscow school № 217, hanged by the fascists in the village of Petrishchevo, who, setting off on a partisan mission, hid her Komsomol badge in a nest box nailed to a young forest tree. Or maybe it was not at all she who put it there, but the frowning partisans mourning their cheerful young girl friend. Or maybe this badge did not at all belong to her, but appeared later in some museum, like the relics of saints scattered over the earth, because no heroic Komsomol girl can exist without the badge. Or maybe Zoya herself was not at all hanged, cruelly tortured and raped

by the unknown fascists speaking their bestial language, but simply went missing on the front lines, like the countless thousands of young Komsomol members of her ilk. Or maybe she simply never was, but only existed in the darkness of time, born somehow or other by man's fantasy, still as beautiful, terrifying and holy. Still, it is not at all she who is important, this undefiled martyress who either did not live at all or who died long ago, but her flaming symbol; this very ruby and gold badge soaked with her blood, now doomed to burn forever regardless of the bygone truth whether she was real or not.

At dawn Sonya fell asleep, having turned completely invisible in the burned-out cabin, and in her dream she was walking through the nocturnal fields shimmering with golden dew, and whispering with barefooted Zoya who had a dark noose mark on her neck.

Masha's Second Face

And they of the people and kindreds and tongues and nations shall see their dead bodies three days and an half, and shall not suffer their dead bodies to be put in graves...

And after three days and an half the Spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them which saw them.

Rev. 11:9, 11:11

She wakes up in the gathering evening twilight. The rain stopped, but the sky tightening its cracked mouth against the pressure of the cold wind is still sad and grey. Pretty far away from the fateful stump Sonya finds the metal piece that replaced one of Tanya's arms; it has a piece of burned wire and flaps of flesh stuck to it, looking like some black cheese spread. Smiling at the thought that Tanya was now given back her real arm for the Pioneer salute in the forest of stone, Sonya throws the metal piece from the river bank into the near leaden water. Then she is walking upstream for a long time, but does not find a bridge she needs to get to the other side and continue her path eastwards where the tree stands in the field with the rusty tractor under it.

It is already getting dark when Sonya reaches a boat hire station enclosed by a wire fence, where dud boats are stacked keel-up, and

where feral dogs live alongside with the former watchman of the boat hire station Grigory, made redundant long ago because they could not afford his wages, but still continuing to exist on the station compound for want of any alternative. At first the greedy owners hired another watchman for half the pay, and Grigory fought with the stranger by hitting the empty jerry cans and howling like a big underwater bird. The stranger was very young and feared the howling emitted by Grigory, but did not leave, and only drank vodka locking himself inside the watchman's hut with a bolt and letting the dogs loose. It was not fear that drove him off but dire need because they could not afford to pay him either. The station was locked, and Grigory started living there peacefully, albeit wagelessly, fishing in the river and scrounging for bread around neighbouring villages. His clothes were almost decayed, his frame skeletal, and his eyes sunken, so Grigory acquired such an appearance that a man of the monastic wanderers who ended up in this godforsaken place took him for a new ascetic and lived with him in the watchman's hut for some time, hearkening to his guttural cries and devotedly feeding his teacher with pea-filled hand pies. But with the advent of frosts the monk could not endure the existence on the station and disappeared, leaving a dirty sock under the bench and a thin booklet with the commandments of unknown saints.

By the time Sonya knocked at the station gates, Grigory had not had any food for a whole week and needed food no more. He needed movement no more as well, sitting in the dark cubbyhole on the station in a tattered armchair and waiting for death to come. Grigory regarded death as an ordinary continuation of life, but where man does not need to eat or drink anymore, which allows him to stand up and wander down the wuthering autumnal roads into the far-off, and to roam the wide world. For long walking Grigory already made himself a stick, because legs could fail him, and now he was listening intently to what is happening, not trusting his poor eyesight, to determine right away the onset of death and to stop torturing himself with the foolish anticipation.

Seeing Sonya, Grigory immediately understands that it is the holy girl Praskovia Palchikova who has come; she goes everywhere on foot and offers herself up to the swinish people to be violated, trying to shame them with her purity. She was born from the earth and her father is God, whom Grigory imagines as a big bashful peasant with an unwashed beard, knobbly feet and a bottomless gaze of large clear eyes. Grigory knows that God drinks vodka, chasing it with sauerkraut and bread, and eats nothing more out of his natural simplicity. When people act like animals, God gets embarrassed by it and sighs

zealously thinking with his big scruffy head how to set things right.

Grigory is delighted by Sonya's arrival and decides not to let her into the station, to wallow in the shame of his eremitic callousness. The girl is perhaps hungry and chilled to the bone; her skin is so thin that the veins are showing through it. In the faint hope that the compassionate man might let her in to warm up and give her a bite to eat, she is knocking on the rusty gates with her small frost-bitten fist. Grigory is looking at her through a little window, deeply ashamed, and the purity of Paraskeva thrown by her Father into the inhumane cold world touches him so deeply that he lapses into a quiet prayerful murmur.

Getting no response to her knocking Sonya leaves. Grigory hears her small bare feet touching the ground. A beatific divine shame fills Grigory, and a spare tear rolls down from his eye. In this very moment the hut's door opens and Sonya comes in, carefully wiping her feet on the doorstep. Closing the door, she sits down on the bench opposite Grigory, putting her frozen hands on her lap. The watchman is crossing himself, marvelled at the holy power preventing him from settling for a lesser shame.

— Do you happen to have a boat, mister? — asks Sonya, looking at the fingers of her hands. Grigory does not answer her, gazing at Sonya's face simperingly and looking for the signs of the swinish violation in it. There is some dirt stuck in Sonya's fair hair, a scratch on her nose, and her little jacket is stained with rotten grass and sand. All this makes Grigory cross himself again.

— I need to get to the other side, — says Sonya.

Grigory gasps and crosses himself again, because he knows that on the other side the girl will be tortured even more and then killed outright. There, on a wooded hill, inaccessible to the heavy November fogs, stands an abandoned church from which the satanic savagery reigns over the lifeless fields. If it were not for the river flowing from a holy underground spring, the abominations would have come and devour Grigory, not disdaining the toughness of the geriatric meat stuck to his bones. Two villages set upstream on the other side have fallen into utter depravity. Grigory has seen many a time fires burning around the church and heard the dismal satanic singing; and once he noticed on the sandbank a woman in black washing in the icy river her strangely silent infant.

— Will you take me to the other side? — Sonya lifts to Grigory her

clear eyes full of unworldly sorrow.

The ferryman stands up and walks to the door wiping away his tears, hyaline from days of malnutrition. The naive martyrdom of the divine daughter is taking away his strength. He understands that even pity is inappropriate when fulfilling God's preordained plan. Heaving the boat into the water, Grigory is praying; he admits to the cat-eyed celestial peasant that he was deeply moved, and that he decides to go on a pilgrimage to distant monasteries even before his death.

Pulling the petrified oars, Grigory is taking Sonya to her torture. She is sitting silently, her hands still on her lap, and looking into the water. She also smiles childishly one time, what makes Grigory want to turn back, but gritting his teeth, he does not yield to weakness and continues his hard Judas work, listening attentively to the breathing of the girl destined to agony.

When the boat's bow hits the sand, Grigory freezes, looking into the cold merciless space. Sonya gets out of the boat onto the grass mutilated by death.

— May God help you, girl, — says Grigory, crossing himself and losing substantial tears.

— Thank you, — answers Sonya and pats the old man on his shoulder. Fearing that his strength might fail him entirely, Grigory shoves off into the rain. Gritting his teeth from grief, he rows to the middle of the river where he lets go of the oars and looks back. Sonya is not on the bank anymore, and the spot where her footprints remain looks empty and frightening. Then Grigory starts howling, covering his face with his hands, not noticing that in his old boat there is already a lot of water that has leaked through the hole under the thwart and that continues coming in.

Sonya is walking down a path amid huge black trees. There are no stars in the sky. Frightening silence is slowly flowing around Sonya, plunging like a silent waterfall past the edge of the horizon covered by the forest. Sonya is famished, so when she sees a small window light behind the branches, she steps off the path immediately in hope to find something edible around human dwelling. Emerging from the brown-red rose hip thickets, she sees a stone church on the glade, surrounded by the crosses of Orthodox graves; the light she noticed is glimmering in its pigeon hole. The church smells of wet stone and fallen leaves. Bracing her feet against the steps, Sonya pushes the heavy door open with both hands, and sneaks cautiously into the wet

dark. There, in the spacious deathly darkness, a fiery circle is drawn with alexandrite light, in which flows the satanic blood of the two godforsaken villages: Little Gorohovka and Great Gorohovka.

It all began several years ago, when in the hut of the old Pelageya of Little Gorohovka her lustful niece Milka shuffled off this mortal coil in the throes of a brutal delivery, having managed to get herself knocked up in the fields even in the rural man-drought. Before her death Milka was choking and puking, roaring violently from pain, but only blood was pouring out of her, and the child remained unborn. When the slut fell silent forever, Pelageya deftly slit her bloated gut open, the same way she slit the pigs many times in autumn, and pulled out an ugly spawn, so awful and large, that the crone stopped wondering at Milka's death right away. The ugly spawn was alive and hairy, but from her ugliness she could not even cry, and was only rattling, secreting gore and writhing in the midwife's arms. However, Pelageya took pity on her, christened her Masha, and put her out to nurse to the village retard Matryona who was hiding at Pelageya's place from the psychiatric doctors; because of her retardation her milk was always in, and she usually expressed it every morning to Pelageya's old git Trofim as his drinking cure. Under simpering gazes of Pelageya who loved recklessly everything alive, Masha was biting with a wheeze the breast of yelping Matryona, and growing up, slowly but steadily.

Soon, a rumour spread through Great Gorohovka, which truly was almost twice as big as the Little one, about a terrifying minger crawling on the ceiling in Pelageya's house and raising the dead from their coffins. It was being said on rustic benches that the cabbage harvest was poor from the devilry that year, that the Healing ikon of the Mother of God turned dark on the cheeks, and that over the past two years three crones and two gaffers had died in Great Gorohovka, and none in the Little one. Both villages were populated entirely by the elderly; all young people left for the cities, and the Gorohovkans held the advanced trench on the man's defensive line against the mortal sadness. In the third spring a Great-gorohovkan gaffer named Pankrat headed to Little Gorohovka with a request to hand over the minger to live in Great Gorohovka, and only use her in Little when it is required. Pankrat was met with a barrage of profanities, and a sturdy wattle fence started to go up around Little Gorohovka.

Yet the Great-gorohovkans could not just tolerate the endless presence of deathly terror in their village, and on a dark March night Pankrat, full of vodka, bawling out front-line songs, smashed through the wattle fence on a kolkhoz harvester, and a mob of Great-gorohovkan crones wasted by hunger and infirmity, armed with axes,

knifes and pitchforks, surged into the breach. The Little-gorohovkans, however, due to the oppressive senile insomnia, were always ready for defence, and in the dead of night, away from the eyes of the state, a bloody carnage began, lit by two huts set ablaze by the aggressor and accompanied by cantankerous senile bickering. Pelageya was battling with a poker, and, swearing, she was smashing the heads of the hostile crones, spilling their brains onto the ground, not sparing even her gossip Tamara Lukichna, who, after Pelageya's hit, had something gushing from her mouth like from a tipped bucket. Using his harvester, Pankrat was running over the hostile crones dressed in nightgowns and overcoats charging around the gardens with axes; he was about to run over Pelageya too, but Trofim emptied a double-barrelled hunting shotgun into him, so the harvester with the dead driver inside ploughed into a shed slaying all six of Pelageya's hens. After that, with no ammunition left, Trofim skilfully wielded his shotgun butt, until an axe caught him in his spine; he fell at his hut's doorstep, wheezing and spitting up blood, right onto the corpse of a Great-gorohovkan crone Kondratievna, freshly slaughtered by him with a buttstroke to her teeth. Pelageya was pinned to the wall of the ruined shed and, in torment, was committing her soul to Satan, exactly when the reinforcements arrived, led by the second Little-gorohovkan gaffer named Ivan Fedotovich, so the Great-gorohovkans retreated abandoning their combat gear and their fatally maimed to the enemy's whim.

Twelve corpses remained on the battlefield, to say nothing of the hens. Yet their sacrifice was not for naught, because with the death of the greedy Pelageya came harmony; Masha was settled inside the neutral gorohovkan church, and it turned out that she did not crawl on ceilings and did not raise the dead; better yet, by letting someone suck her index finger, she restored their youthful vigour. After the carnage only two men were left in both villages — Ivan Fedotovich in Little and Nil Gavrilych in Great, and each of them took ten crone-wives after it, in utter contempt for the former Christian custom. The God-fearing crones crossed themselves for some time, but succumbed to sin, and soon went full animal, which was largely fueled by senility and their collective regressing into a childish state. On warm summer days, right in the middle of the village streets, one could see the half-naked crones engaging in group sexual intercourse, like a writhing mass of worms, right on the barren soil, or dancing in a wobbly circle around the well to the shouting of lewd ditties, or even swaying, dangling their chicken legs on the wattle fence, laughing, each with a broom clenched between shrivelled thighs.

A year passed, and the crones began to have children, crooked and

wrinkled, as if old already, giving hope for the revival of once-dying villages. By that time Masha turned into a hunchbacked pale girl with a protruding lower lip; she lived right inside the church, messed in the corners, and her droppings gave off some pungent unfamiliar stench. Using her droppings, Masha incessantly defaced the ikons, touching up their eyes and putting on some lipstick on the countenances. On feast days in the church, they read the Gospel from back to front, spat on the crucifixion, and, climbing on the altar one by one, urinated onto the Holy Scripture, squealing with delight. Masha hosted the orgy, shouting profanities in a hoarse voice, and always defaecated at the end, wiping herself with an open Bible, after which carnal mass-indulgence immediately started.

When Sonya appears on the church doorstep, evening prayer is being held; Nil Gavrilych is chanting it, his trousers down to the knees, replacing every word in the prayer with profanities as he goes. A cat hung by Masha is swaying, shuddering and twisting above the altar; wet cat shit is dropping out of it. The crones, wearing mourning dresses and headscarves, holding candles, are standing around it, crossing their scrawny arses and imitating the passing of flatulence with their mouths. Hearing the creak of the door hinges, they turn towards Sonya. Their gaunt sharp-nosed faces seem completely similar to Sonya, as if Masha created in Gorohovkas her own folk.

Nil Gavrilych stops blaspheming, and, turning his hairy mush towards the door, squints at Sonya and growls throatily. Upon the signal of this growl the crones snarl and start creeping up on Sonya, crossing themselves at five points with their candle-free hands. But Sonya does not look on them, but behind the altar, where Masha is standing. The eyes of the little hunchback girl are sparkling like black egg yolks; tangled dirty plaits hang down on either side of her face. Clenching her teeth, she puckers her lips and lets out a low whistle. Sonya feels how the talisman is thrusting into her chest with icy pain, as if trying to hide behind Sonya's thin skin. From pain Sonya opens her mouth and clenches her fists. Through her tears, she sees a huge man with a goat head dressed in a black fur coat appear from the shadowed back wall of the church. His eyes, identical to Masha's, root Sonya by her feet to the floor.

Father, wheezes Masha. Let me kill her, father. Or do you love her more than me.

Sonya cannot move or scream. She only feels the frosty gaze of the goat-headed and the pain in her chest, where the talisman has entered it.

Let me kill her, father.

The crones lunge at Sonya, grab her, and drag her like a doll towards an inverted cross made of two logs standing by the wall. Squealing curses, they undress Sonya, scratching her with their sharp yellow nails, and tie her, head down, by her feet to the cross. Nil Gavrilych is hoarsely calling upon God in order to lash him with a stream of choice, stomach-turning profanity. The crone Grigorievna is nailing Sonya's hands to the crossbeam. Sonya is rolling her eyes from pain and screaming wildly. The demoniac hags are crawling out of every corner; they are pinching the girl's body and shoving their gnarled fingers into her eyes, and one of them, Uliana Ignatievna, is poking a piercing awl into Sonya's stomach. Nil Gavrilych is heading to the scene of action to rape Sonya while she is still alive. But the hunchbacked girl grabs him by the sleeve of his shirt, and he bellows in confused rage poking at the air. Finally, the crones become so many that they erect the cross with Sonya nailed to it using ropes, and fix it on the wall.

Burn marks and bruises can be seen on Sonya's body in the glow of candles. The hunchbacked girl approaches, smelling strongly of urine. Sonya, wincing in pain, is peering into her upturned face. The ugly spawn presses her splayed hand against Sonya's stomach.

I will kill you and there will be more of my power. No need to share the power. Soon my power will be everywhere. Father gives you to me.

Masha reaches out her hand, and it hangs in mid-air. An awl settles into it from the darkness. Masha clenches her fist and puts the cold sharp awl to Sonya's breast, against her heart.

Go away, she says, and pushes with her whole body. The awl enters Sonya with a soft wet crunch, and she shudders, not closing her glazing eyes anymore.

Masha pulls out the awl, after which the blood immediately starts gushing out of the hole in Sonya's chest, and turns to the flock.

— We will partake of it, — she says. — Just let the blood drain to the floor of the temple.

Sclerotic howling goes up in reply. With the still and amazedly widened eyes of crucified and bleeding Sonya in the background, the soil wedding begins.

The trackwalker Vasily is doing his morning rounds. He has already got very drunk, due to the painful need for the hair of the dog, so his steps are uneven, heavily shifting the loose gravel. Vasily is muttering incoherently, trying to dilute with a song the monotonous boredom of his path covered with the drizzling autumnal rain. Occasionally he taps the rail with an iron bar, listening to the dull ring and its reflection in the vast expanse of the fields. Vasily's working life would be similar to the path of a donkey fallen behind its caravan, if it were not for the rotgut that he is constantly pouring down his throat. Rotgut makes everything a non-issue for him, and he forgets about his caravan that vanished in the mirror-like expanse.

With mooing Vasily raises his eyes from the sleepers and sees a naked dirty woman with a bloodstain on her face walking along the railway line. He could not care less about who beat up and raped the woman; he simply watches her bare feet treading on the railway sleepers. He knows that he now will have to give evidence to grey policemen, but he could not care less about it either. He is looking at the woman's bare feet, until she gets very close. She is holding a stick with two nails on its end. The woman passes by Vasily, and he decides to wait for some time before turning around and looking at her naked arse. And it is when the stick with two nails slams into the back of his head from behind.

Vasily crashes onto the embankment and starts sliding down the loose gravel. The woman hastens his sliding by kicking him, then takes off Vasily's clothes in the bushes and puts them on. She takes out an almost empty bottle of wine out of the orange jacket's pocket and drinks the rest. Then she picks up Vasily's iron bar and gets back onto the embankment. Looking with unseeing glance into the distance, she wipes the blood off her face with her hand wet from the rain. Then she smiles, because she remembers her name at last. Her name is Natasha. From Vasily's corpse begins her new bloody path.

At 9 A.M a pensioner Nadezhda Filippovna who runs the household in the flat of her married son Roman, opens the door to Natasha. The rain has completely washed the blood off from Natasha's face, and the iron bar she threw into the bushes. Natasha calls herself a maintenance worker and politely asks in a sodden voice for a glass of tap water to quench her thirst. Nadezhda Filippovna, wincing at Natasha's stench which she puts down to the girl's humble origins, brings her a cup of water anyway, and leans out of the door, exploiting which Natasha strongly punches her in the face with her fist. The pensioner falls down, and Natasha finishes her off with her foot, clearly enjoying the strength returning to her. Having dragged

the corpse into the flat, she picks out clothes and shoes from the wardrobe belonging to the daughter-in-law of the killed, douses herself in perfume, washes her hands and hair in the bath, eats alive a fidgety budgie caught in its cage, swallowing even its little feathers, and piles on the lipstick that she found in the drawer by the mirror, onto her dead lips. Then she does her eyes, powders the swollen holes on the sides of her nose, clips her hair back, and paints her nails with a brush, dipping it into a bottle of pink varnish. When she leaves the flat, the only thing that sets her apart from any other pretty young woman is the kitchen hatchet used for bone chopping hidden in the sleeve of her shearling coat.

Around half past ten, in a stairwell of a nine-storey house, Natasha kills with a hatchet blow to the head a Year 7 student Volodya who is bunking off school with his mate Igor. Igor tries to run, but Natasha catches him on the stairs, grabs him by his collar, and hits him on the head with the hatchet as well. The boy's legs loose the stairs beneath them, and he hangs in Natasha's hand. She smashes the faces of both schoolboys against the stairwell wall, and, holding them by their hair, smears their blood and brains in thick lines on the white plaster. Doing it, she imagines Sonya and her little friends in their place.

Half an hour later Natasha attacks a schoolgirl Lida returning home after a shortened school day, just because her hair is the same colour as Sonya's; she drags her into a back alley, chokes her, and, biting through her throat, drinks her hot child blood running down inside Lida's jacket, holding the corpse by the temples, so that the girl's boots are pressing into her knees. Then, putting Lida cheek down onto the kerb, swearing, she chops her head off with the hatchet, so that Lida will not stand up and start walking again.

Around noon Natasha kills a middle-aged woman in a back alley in order to obtain her purse with money. With this money she buys a real meat cleaver at the ironmonger’s, and throws the old one into the sewer.

After that Natasha is circling the city like a rabid wolf, smashing the heads of the secondary school age children and slathering the house walls with their bright blood. She feels the police's deadly net is closing in on her. She sometimes hears the attack dogs barking in the next street, and the piercing, holy-fool's howling of the sirens. Around 4 P.M. they are trying to arrest her, and she is running towards the police car clenching the cleaver in her fist. Two policemen are shouting at the break of their voices ordering her to stop. Pistol bullets are piercing her clothes on her chest, drenching with blood her white

blouse under her open shearling coat. With a yell, Natasha strikes one of the policemen hitting his shoulder. The second one continues to shoot her from behind. One bullet hits Natasha's head. Despite the pain, she kills the wounded enemy fallen onto the pavement, with a powerful cleaver blow, and picks up the pistol. The second policeman is running towards the car. Wrapping herself in the shot-through shearling coat and hiding in her pocket the ranged weapon she finally obtained, Natasha walks away through the dead darkening streets. The circle of her bloody trajectory closes, returning to the chemical bastion amidst the fields. As darkness falls, she approaches the dump pit from which she emerged at the pale autumnal dawn, and, stopping beside the van tilted by the unevenness of the earth's surface, lifting her head with her gaping mouth, she drinks the cold rain.

That is when Sonya starts seeing with her wide-open eyes again. It was the Komsomol badge tempered on the young female partisan's flaming chest, now part of Sonya's soul, that protected the girl's heart from the deadly awl stab. The cross on which she is crucified is already lying on the floor in the middle of the black church; the satanic crones are scurrying about, preparing to roast Sonya and gobble her down. Hunchbacked Masha is sitting by the altar, lighting a pile of damp brushwood with her bare hands. Squinting with pain, Sonya rips her crunching hands off the nails, and stands up from the cross. The cannibal crones flinch away from her, surrounding hunchbacked Masha and screeching like rats. Sonya raises her head towards the dome of the church, and sees the firmament painted there, and the sun burning with long tongues of fire in the middle of it. Sonya smiles, having again found the thread of her eternity, and starts slowly rising into the air.

Oh, what freedom is filling Sonya's steadily beating heart when her feet leave the ground, heading towards the painted clouds; her eyes are slowly floating up past the columns, supporting the church dome only for the sake of plausibility... What darkness is coursing through her blood, full of star dust and coldness of the infinite spaces that not even a single sun is able to warm...

Having frozen at a height of three metres, Sonya looks down and meets the vicious glare of the little hunchbacked girl. The crones, whispering curses, are rustling with their dry lips around their mistress like a flock of gaunt black birds. Sonya takes a fiery wheel out of the painted sky with both hands, and throws it into Masha's head. The burning crones, squealing, scatter in all directions, illuminating the long-forgotten ikons with their flames. Like a swamp kikimora, the cheerful echo is repeating their piercing death

screeches. One after another they are falling on the floor, turning into elongated curling fires, reminding Sonya of her last Pioneer summer.

Only Masha remains unharmed after the blast of the fiery wheel. The fire only singes her plaits, and she, covering her face with her splayed hand, continues looking at Sonya. Her eyes, however, have lost their power over Sonya's risen body, in whose chest the ruby metal is now shining. When she understands that, a clot of invisible weight passes by Sonya, who suddenly moves herself aside in the air. It blasts her with a stinking gust, and hits the church wall, cracking the surface of the frescoes. The second blast passes into the darkness a little higher than Sonya's head. Sonya barely manages to hide behind the nearest column, from where she hurls into Masha a second fiery wheel. The hunchbacked girl does not even try to avoid it; her dress bursts into flames fraying into charred holes, baring the skin untouched by the fire. Two blows of a giant hammer are shaking the column behind which Sonya is hanging in the air. Lime is falling from the dome, getting stuck in her hair. Seeing a crack in the column shaft, Sonya flies to another one, casting a third wheel mid-air. She sees the fire sweep over Masha like weightless water, burning the ties holding her plaits. And she sees in Masha's naked hunch her second face, small and evil. She sees small legs and arms sticking out of her back. She sees Masha's Siamese twin brother, who, feeding on his sister's diabolical vital force, is growing slowly, like the trees.

The side wave of the next blow catches Sonya's shoulder and sends her back, spinning her body through the air. She barely manages to descend, to avoid crashing into the arch between the columns. Not wasting her power on fire anymore, Sonya starts flying in an arc, descending towards the altar beside which Masha is standing. Having instantly figured out Sonya's intent, the little hunchback girl is trying to face her all the time gasping like a toad. The church shakes from the battering blows pounding against its walls; one of the columns collapses with a crash, followed by a section of the wall falling outward, raising a plume of dust and revealing a massive, jagged breach into the night rustling with rain.

Swooping down from above, Sonya knocks Masha off her feet with a knee strike to her mouth, and, pressing the girl's body to the floor and sinking her teeth into her chin, she is tearing apart the little child face on her back. Blood is gushing out of Masha's hunch; she is wheezing and writhing in agony, trying to rip off the death that attacked her from the air, pulling with her hands by Sonya's hair. But Sonya, growling low, is stubbornly tearing the little face apart, prying the jaws open, and ripping the child's breathing throat.

When Masha stops twitching, stretching her bare feet smeared with droppings towards the fire, Sonya unclenches her teeth and sits beside her on her heels. She is breathing heavily; her hands are covered in blood.

— No need to share the power, — she says aloud, wincing from the pain in her gum, although no one can hear her anymore.

Sonya makes a cut on Masha's throat with a knife she found on the floor, and, grabbing with two hands by her temples, she tears her head off her neck, oozing with blood. Then she chops off her right hand, shakes the blood out of it onto the floor and roasts it above the fire on the knife's blade. Having gnawed at the foul-tasting, burnt meat, Sonya gets dressed and, dragging Masha's head by her plaits across the floor, leaves the battlefield. Under the rainy twilit sky, she sees the goat-headed standing knee-deep in the dark river water. His eyes are closed.

Sonya flings the head at his feet into the aluminium water that immediately starts swallowing the dead grinning face. The head is sinking, dragging the long, splayed hair into the depths. The rain-rippled rings quickly fade. Turning around, Sonya walks amid the crooked grave crosses towards the forest.

The Partisans

And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire.

Rev. 16:8

The nocturnal darkness is already filling the main process building. Approaching the entrance, Natasha looks back to the spot where she fell struck by the poisonous nails in her face, and finds a faint bloodstain on the sand. The process building's dark dust-covered windows loom above her head. The signs of a different, unreal time in which she now exists. Do the dead feel fear, she asks herself. Do the dead feel the rings of despair on their bodies. I am dead now after all. The sky opened up above me, and there is no heaven and no hell there, only eternal sorrow of death. A death that is simple and not terrifying, consisting only of the spurts of blood and the crunch of snapping cartilage. A death that is mundane, like sex, that also does

scare you in childhood, until you grow up and realize that everyone is doing the very thing you were afraid of.

Natasha enters the process building. She goes upstairs and sits down on the metal floor by the remains of the fire. It seems to her that Sonya's scent still lingers beneath the soaring structures. Natasha passes her hand over the cooled ashes and listens to the rain drizzling and creaking along the eaves.

Kostik and Liuba come back from hunting after midnight. With a fatigue, inherent only to the dead, they round the process building, dragging a croaked stray dog by his hind legs. Natasha hears their footsteps. She pulls the gun out of her pocket. The children pass beneath her and start going up the stairs. Suddenly Liuba stops, sensing Natasha's smell. Not seeing her yet, Kostik aims the loaded pipe gun into the darkness. Natasha shoots him in the head, again and again pulling the trigger of the pistol, loudly popping into the emptiness. After two first shots Kostik falls on the steps; the next bullet clangs against the railing, but two more after that do hit the target. Natasha, avoiding the policeman's mistake, is aiming at the eyes. Liuba drags Kostik out of the line of fire, and Natasha, putting the pistol back into the pocket and grabbing the cleaver firmly, jumps down at once, landing on the metal floor with a heavy clang. Liuba hurls a piece of metal into her and hits her leg. Natasha straightens up after the jump and lunges forward with a ferocious howl. The girl picks up the pipe gun that Kostik dropped and with a sharp click launches a poisoned nail into her stomach. Natasha's terrible blow breaks her shoulder and knocks her off her feet. Kneeling on the boy's chest as he groans hoarsely and covers his shot-up face with his hands, Natasha chops his head off with three blows. Then she pulls out the nail stuck in her stomach, grabs Liuba by her hair and drags her upstairs. The girl's knees clatter against the iron corners of the steps. Liuba is squealing and with her one hand that still obeys her she clings to the railing. Once Natasha drags her victim upstairs, she flings her onto the floor.

— Where did the girl with white hair go? — she asks.

— You scum, — answers Liuba, wincing from the awful pain in her gashed shoulder.

— I'll kill you, bitch, — says Natasha calmly. — Answer.

Liuba is silent. Natasha takes a swing and slams the cleaver into her shin, breaking her bone. Liuba's thin little figure doubles over on the

floor with a piercing shriek.

— Don't hit me, they went to the forest, — she screams, her voice cracking from pure fright. — The one by the river.

— Why?

— I don't kno—ow, — unbearable pain begins to tear at Liuba's leg, mangling the words in her mouth. Natasha grabs her by the hair again and yanks her off the floor. Liuba covers her face with her hand. The cleaver hits her neck with a crunch. After the second hit the girl's body hits the floor, splashing a dark stream of blood against the wall. Natasha lifts Liuba's head to her face, peering into the lifeless eyes, then slams it into the wall with a violent swing.

— Look, you bloody little beast, — she says, addressing absent Sonya and wiping the cleaver blade against the clothes on the corpse of the beheaded girl. — This is the way I'll kill you.

As Natasha steps out into the sodden expanse of the fields, she hears the rumble of distant thunder from beyond the forest, but, looking around, she sees no lightning, for it is not thunder at all, but the echo of the titanic struggle between Sonya and hunchbacked Masha, breaking the stone walls of the profane church. Plunging into the impenetrable forest, Natasha is thinking about the cold bewitching power of the stars that descended from the sky to beneath the earth, and about her fate that is losing its direction in the entwinement of the trees dripping with water. She is walking along the path, following Sonya's way, because it is the only path leading north. She finds the tree on which in the nest box lived the sinister talisman, and touches with her hands the scars, left on the bark by Tanya's metal arm. Natasha steps out into fresh, uneven clearings cluttered with scorched debris, and investigates the charred, roofless cabin standing by the river.

The bench where Sonya was sleeping is still full of her gentle scent, and Natasha, squatting, presses her mouth to the plank smoothed by human bodies in order to imagine Sonya right there and see her clear eyes. And then she is getting frightened, because in a single sensation she suddenly perceives the dump pit and realises that Sonya did not eliminate her, like the rest of them, but left her to rot on. Natasha cannot explain to herself the reasons for this action, but she understands that Sonya did this intentionally.

— Why didn't you kill me? — she whispers to the bench, and tears

suddenly start flowing from her eyes. Excruciating sadness is clenching Natasha's cold heart, excruciating sadness and pain. She tries to wipe away the tears with the back of her hand, but they flow even faster, and now there is no stopping them, as if the whole ice of Natasha's murky life has melted, and this is its meltwater.

On the other bank, a brief, dull rattle of gunfire erupts, like a large wild boar crashing through the brush.

Sobs wrack Natasha's body and she twitches all over, breathing heavily. She feels the hopelessness of existence in this cold alien autumn, and her past life feels like a long sleep to her. She remembers the yard of her technical school where she was smoking with her girl friends looking at the semi-transparent wall of poplars growing behind the stone wall, and remembers their dirty girlish talk. She remembers the acts of brutal mating in the dingy, sick-smelling halls room, with the fingernails digging into the edge of the worn-out sheet, and the dreary howl of her student's orgasm, and the thudding of wheezing bodies against the creaking iron bedstead. She remembers the time of the autumnal rains spent in a drunken stupor and dancing through shadowy hallways, but she cannot remember what she was feeling back then; that is why this memory does not console Natasha but only deepens her sorrow into her dead past.

She is crying for a long time, until there are no more tears in her eyes, and then she stands up to follow Sonya's tracks to the edge of the world. She gets down to the river bank from the cabin, where a dry reed rustling with raindrops grows in the water. Her feet tread almost silently on the sodden sandy soil and clumps of rotten grass. But even this almost stillborn sound is enough for the grey-haired moustached partisan called Upyr to scent a stranger nearby.

The remnants of the squad arrived here by following the notches left on the branches by their comrades. The missing were twenty-four hours overdue at the rally point, and Bear knew that they will never come back anymore. Only death could make his invincible warriors violate the order. Leading the remnants toward an unspeakably bloody vengeance, Bear thought, with a terror awakening for the first time in years of war, that the final battle is near.

Upyr attacks Natasha from the back, detaching himself from the log wall, and his heavy wet and foetid body slams her stomach-first onto the grass. Pressing the woman's hand clutched around the cleaver against the ground, Upyr pokes beneath his victim's ribs with a knife and hoarsely orders her not to move. But Natasha wriggles out from

under him to her side with a force unexpected by him, and shoots Upyr in the stomach with a deafening bang. In response to this the wide army knife stabs Natasha's side. In spite of the pain, she strongly strikes the enemy with her elbow into the mush, and, having freed her hand with the cleaver, she crawls to the side to have enough room for a swing. Upyr grabs her by her leg and piles on top of her again, wrenching Natasha's hand holding the cleaver with a loud crunch. Natasha tries to shoot again, but there is no ammo left, and the pistol aimed right at the partisan's bestial eyes is only clicking helplessly.

Bear's dirty hulk, with a long, matted, wild beard covering the lower part of his face, appears from behind a tree trunk. He makes some strange slurping sound, and Upyr, grinning evilly, crawls to the side, leaving Natasha lying at the side of the struggle. Natasha gets on all fours, holding her stabbed side. Bear is looking at the bloodstains covering Natasha's blouse where the police bullets entered her body. His patched tunic is dark from the water, because the squad has just swum across the river.

— Your name? — he asks in a deep voice, and his bearded mug seems to stretch forward. He looks more like a huge monkey, not a bear.

— Natasha, — answers Natasha, gripping the cleaver more firmly and bracing for a deadly battle.

— Who was shooting at you?

— The pigs.

— For what?

— I killed a lot of people, so they were shooting at me.

— How many?

— I didn't count.

— Killed why?

— Because I hate them.

— Don't tell me you're a partisan, — rejoiced Upyr, holding his stomach shot—through by Natasha. — And I nearly knifed you.

— The hell you'll knife me, — Natasha answers evilly, standing up

from the ground. — If I had one more round in the pistol I'd have blown your brains out.

Two more partisans appear on the bank; one of them is one-eyed, and he is called Rat, and the second one is a dark—haired woman wearing a headscarf browned by road grime; her name is Alyona and she is called Pox. For a ferocious battle Rat is carrying a light machine gun on his back; an assault rifle is hanging on Pox's chest, as well as three grenades on her belt. They rarely part, although they could not stand each other when they were alive, but death brought them such a love, that does not need kisses or other sexual caresses.

— Our guys went missing here, — says Bear. — Didn't hear them?

— Your guys I didn't hear, — answers Natasha. — Or was it them shooting on the other bank?

— I was shooting, — says Pox. — I thought I saw a lass among the trees.

— I told you to stop gobbling down those toadstools, — Rat laughs hoarsely, baring his rotten teeth.

— I do have wolf's eyes, — says Pox resentfully. — It was a real fascist lass, fair-haired, and her mug was German. She was far away, so I fired a burst at her. She just vanished into thin air. Meaning she wasn't there in reality. Otherwise this brat wouldn't have slipped away from me...

— I know this lass, — Natasha interrupts her. — She's no ordinary lass. She's a terrible louse, a real fascist scum. I want to kill her myself.

— We should try this bitch, — roars Upyr. — Pour copper into her throat.

— Where was she going, in what direction? — Natasha asks Pox, wincing from the pain in her side.

— There, — Pox waves her hand toward the north. — The forest ends soon there, and the German fields begin.

— We should catch up with her, — Natasha decides evilly.

— Hold off on hoofing it, — says Bear. — We need to find our guys first. They had their gathering place in this cabin.

— It was a glorious battle here, — says Pox. Burnt forest all around.

— The tanks, — growls Rat. — They crushed them with the tanks.

— Stop talking nonsense, — Bear snaps at him. — They would've hidden from the tanks in the forest. It must be some new German wingless machines that hang in the air like the clouds.

— The helicopters, — Pox suggests a word she once tortured out of a Hitlerite boy. Pox had to cut off four of the boy's fingers before he revealed the military secret, so she was very proud of her patience.

— Oh, you filthy scum, — swears Rat into the dark sky.

— Maybe someone managed to escape, — says Bear grimly. — Maybe Owl at least.

The last, fifth partisan called Leshy crawls out from the reed thicket, crunching as he moves. His coarse red hair is long and tangled like a camel's mane. He is short and his spine is crooked.

— There're wolf tracks on the sand by the water, — he says to Bear. — Three of our guys were jumping into the river. And there's also boiled fish stuck in the grass.

Bear pulls off his matted ushanka. The partisans are silent. The rumble of a departing train is heard somewhere far away.

— Do you have pistol rounds? — Natasha breaks the silence, inspecting her bloody palms. No one answers her, because the squad is mourning their fallen comrades.

After combing the area, the partisans find remnants of clothing and a dark spot on the ground where fell Sack, whose blood left a downward-stretched stain on the cabin's wall. They formed a circle around it.

— Comrades soldiers, — Bear addresses the partisans, scanning their stern unhuman faces. — Let us swear before our heroically fallen comrades to fight against vile fascism to the last drop of blood, just as they did. — he turns to Natasha. — This girl, whose chest met bullets instead of love, we are accepting into our squad. She will stand in the place of those who fell for our Motherland's freedom.

— Thank you, — says Natasha.

— You'll become a Komsomol girl tomorrow, — decides Bear. — Pox, give our new soldier Natasha a sawn—off.

Sonya is descending into the ravine, limping on her wounded leg. Pox was far away from her and fired in bursts at her legs, trying to render her victim unable to move. Only one bullet hit the target, but even that would have been enough had not Sonya turned transparent like the cold air of the night. Sonya was able to completely disappear only when she was motionless, so when Pox was inspecting the bloody trail on the grass standing just two steps away from Sonya who was sitting under a tree on fallen leaves, Sonya had to endure the annoying pain and hold the wound on her calf with her hand. The partisan woman was scrutinising the area lingeringly and silently, tasting the blood off her finger and brushing the branches with the barrel of her assault rifle. When she finally walked away, swearing and treading heavily through the leaves, Sonya let the blood run down onto the ground freely, closing her eyes from pain. She did not know how many more partisans were moving through the nocturnal forest and felt sad and tired. She wondered what would have happened if she had been hit by one of Masha's blows and the gold enamel stars had frozen in her eyes forever.

— It probably makes no difference for you, who guards you, — she was whispering to the talisman warming her child heart under her skin. — You're as cruel as everyone; you can't love me.

The most difficult thing for Sonya is that she cannot rise above the of tops of the bare trees and fly northwards, and stop deforming her path because of the trunks firmly driven into the ground. Either the weather is unfit for flying, or Sonya was utterly exhausted by pulling the fiery wheels out of space, anyway, she has to go on foot, despite her lame leg and the need to get far away from the enemy's path as fast as possible. Sonya is actually suffering for nothing, because she does not know the history of the region's partisan movement, otherwise she would be calm, because there are only five partisans left and they are moving in the opposite direction vainly trying to find their battle-tested comrades in the wilds of time.

At the bottom of the ravine, where an icy stream flows, it is cold and wet. In the stream Sonya finds a frog asleep until spring and eats it, warming the bites in her mouth before swallowing them. She breaks off a sharp twig and digs out the bullet that passed almost all the way through her calf and settled just under the skin on the other side.

Sonya comes out of the ravine and walks for a very long time, so long, that the forest starts to clear as if it has grown tired of inventing new trees before Sonya's eyes. She feels the breath of the wind on the skin of her face again, and soon she plunges into the vastness of the combine-harvested fields. Treading barefoot on the cold-hardened earth ploughed for winter crops, Sonya is thinking about her loneliness in the Universe, where the tenderness of real life is absent. She is thinking about the extinct flowers that will not open their buds towards the sun ever again, and about the departed birds, now with nowhere to return to. The rain has stopped, and in a cloud break appears the moon illuminating the field and the lone tree growing at the cliff of time, and the rusty tractor stuck up to its wheels in the no-man's-land between heaven and earth.

Kolkhoz tractor driver Fyodor Petukhov spent twenty-five years driving his agricultural vehicle. His tractor he loved as much as his mother, Evdokia Alekseevna, who died of a mental disorder when Fyodor lying drunk in the field, was run over by a mower and lost both his legs. At the city hospital Fyodor was issued crutches instead of legs, and he could walk with them, but not operate heavy machinery. Fyodor began drinking poteen right away, without giving rest to his body weakened by execution, and very quickly he drank himself into a rage; he began beating his wife and kids, and just before the New Year he punched the communist comrade Gurin, the kolkhoz chairman, in the mug when he tried to talk some sense into Fyodor about family life. Due to such swinish behaviour, Fyodor's wife left him, and other kolkhoz workers shunned the embittered tractor driver who was drunk all the time and terrible in his uncontrolled rampage.

Once, having got as drunk as an angry pig, Fyodor hobbled along the edge of the village on a summer evening, bellowing a filthy song incoherently, when his attention was suddenly caught by the stars scattered over the roofs of the huts, turning black in the gathering darkness. Fyodor slowed down his hobbling and goggled at the luminaries, his mouth agape, and then, with a powerful thrust, the satanic force of the legless hero pilot of the Great Patriotic War Meresyev suddenly entered his throat. Letting out a frenzied roar, Fyodor took off galloping across a cabbage field, shaking his mush and spitting with his maw, as if trying to get rid of the dark force inside him. He made an especially big jump in the middle of the field, and, unable to keep his balance, tumbled to the ground with full force; then he dropped his crutches and started to crawl, digging into the soil with his hands and pushing off with his stumps.

But the force of the dead pilot did not leave Fyodor, and he became

completely feral; he settled in the vast expanse of the fields and forgot about his crutches. For moving in space, he used the method of the tumbleweed, reaching such speed, that it was impossible to catch him neither on a harvester, nor on a tractor. Fyodor fed on earthworms that he dug out of the ploughed field with his mush; he also crushed chickens with his rolling mass, and no one dared to take them away from him, so he devoured them raw lying in the field under the belly of a decommissioned, rusted tractor. However, the kolkhoz stockman Grigory once tried to shoot the crazed tractor driver with a Berdan rifle, but the bullet did not harm Fyodor.

When lame Sonya appears on the forest line that fringes Fyodor's habitat from the south, he has just crawled out from under the tractor, and now he is sprawled out on the balk, rejoicing at the end of the long rain and the onset of flying weather. The moon is illuminating his hair mixed with soil, and the wind is striking him in the face from the sky. Grinning, Fyodor spreads out his calloused hands like wings, and for him the darkness of the earth merges with the darkness of the sky, as it always does before he sets off on a combat mission in his rusty tractor. Clean, rain-washed silence reigns all around. Fyodor is flying alone, free from the heavy military machine.

Sonya stops above him, casting an almost transparent shadow from the moon floating in the sky.

— Where are you flying to, mister? — she asks quietly, not to disturb the soaring of the legless man. — Towards the stars?

Fyodor looks at her absently.

— I'm having rest before the training air combat, — he answers sullenly. — Go away, girl, don't disturb me.

— I was told that the forest of stone grows around here, — says Sonya humbly, bending to touch her wounded calf.

— The forest of stone is not around here, but very far away; only no one believes in it. I saw it from my plane, — says Fyodor.

— I do believe, — says Sonya. — Will you show me the way?

— You won't get there, girl, — sighs Fyodor, moved for some reason by Sonya's understanding, to the point close to being human. — There, your little leg is also injured. I can take you there by plane.

— But where's your plane?

— There it is, standing there, — Fyodor sweeps his arm towards the tractor. — Only there's no fuel.

— How are we supposed to go without fuel? — asks Sonya, incredulously inspecting the machine covered with rust the wheels of which are submerged in the ground like in riverine water.

— The fuel is in a bucket near the kolkhoz museum, but I can't get there, over the fence.

Not only failing to find any flight capability in the tractor but generally doubting its mobility, Sonya sighs.

— Don't be sad, girl, the machine is in perfect order, — Fyodor, lifting himself on his clenched fists, crawls toward the tractor wheel, on which there are stars crudely scratched with a nail, perhaps indicating the number of shot down enemy tractors. — Go get the fuel and we'll take off right away.

— Alright, — Sonya agrees tiredly. — Where is this kolkhoz museum of yours?

— Just go straight ahead and you'll reach Volodka's hut at the edge of the village, then go straight past it, and you'll come right up to a fence, there you'll see a gate on your right. Just knock, Kirillovna will open up. Tell her you've come to see the museum. And then grab the bucket and come back here. Understood?

— Understood.

Limping, Sonya heads towards the village. Little shabby huts of the village outskirts hiding their senile nudity behind pathetic apple trees are visible in the moonlight. In the distance amidst the fields a large building is lit by a single yellow light. The kolkhoz machinery is stored there until spring. Sensing Sonya's approach, the village dogs break into barking.

The kolkhoz museum looks more like a shed with a three-fingered flag mount jutting out of the wall like a hand, meant for festive red banners. The plaster is peeling off it; the yard is overgrown with dry weeds, and the glass in the dark window is shattered in the middle by a stone, that is why the window is boarded up from the inside. Sonya knocks on a small board with “Museum of the Michurin Kolkhoz” written on it, tacked askew to the fence. No one answers her knock, and Sonya kicks the gate hard. A dog is barking frantically in the neighbouring yard, rattling its taut chain. Kirillovna appears from the

museum with a fishing lantern in her hand. She is shining the light into Sonya's squinting face, unable to wake up from her long deathbed sleep. Her face, shrivelled like an old apple, shows fright at the arrival of an unknown creature, and the crone is worried that death has come to get her.

— I've come from the city, grandma, to see the museum, — says Sonya, shielding her eyes with her hand.

— In the middle of the night? — Kirillovna asks herself. — Come back in the morning. Museum's closed now.

— I've got school tomorrow, — lies Sonya.

Instantly believing Sonya as the embodiment of her own afterlife, Kirillovna opens the gate and, wheezing, pulls out a notebook out of her overcoat in order to write the girl a ticket.

— Only I have no money, — Sonya gives a sad sigh. — I spent all of it on the train.

— No money necessary, dearie, — says Kirillovna, handing Sonya, with her trembling, withered hand, a sheet from her notebook on which something is scrawled with a dull pencil. — Anyway, no one’s been coming to see the museum for ages.

It is tight in the museum; the main part of it is taken up by an iron stove and Kirillovna's bunk; on the wall opposite the window hangs a Board of Kolkhoz Honor covered in tattered red velvet, with photographs of the kolkhoz chairman and other male and female communists glued to it, most of them long dead already. On the back wall hangs a portrait of an old bearded man wearing professor glasses, which is supposed to depict the great plant breeder Michurin whose name was given to the kolkhoz. Beneath the portrait stands a small table with a two-litre pickle jar; its bottom covered in dead flies and brown grime.

Kirillovna lights a bare light bulb growing on a flex right out of the wall, and tells Sonya the legendary story of the formation of the kolkhoz, dating back to the years of the mythical collectivisation and the struggle against the dark kulak forces. Sonya is not listening to her, drearily gazing at the portrait of the old man above the table and fiddling with the drawstring of her dirty jacket.

— And what is it in your jar, — Sonya asks Kirillovna out of the blue.

Bewildered Kirillovna stares blankly at the dusty glass of the jar, which still bears the traces of a poorly peeled label.

— These, my dear, are the seeds of the garnet eucalypti, which the scientist Michurin presented to our kolkhoz.

— And why don't you plant them? — wonders Sonya, bending towards the jar.

— They are for commemorative purposes, girl. These seeds will rot in our dead soil, and the memory about the great horticulturist will perish. And so, they have been lying here for many years, waiting for communism to come, when the whole earth will live again.

— Can I have a look, — says Sonya, grabbing the jar and dumping its contents onto the table.

— Not allowed! — Kirillovna squeals senilely, aghast at the sacrilege. — What is it you're doing, you pest!

Sonya manages to see in the pile of dust and croaked flies several large black seeds, before the crone pushes her away from the table. Sonya turns around and swings the jar at Kirillovna's head with full force. The jar cracks and falls apart in Sonya's hands; Kirillovna staggers back and collapses to the floor, and only then covers her forehead with her hand.

— You want to kill me, don't you, you brat, — she says hoarsely.

Sonya, kneeling on Kirillovna's chest, grabs a pillow from the bed and presses it with her hand against the crone's face. Kirillovna is mooing and twitching breathlessly, limply pounding on Sonya with her wrinkled fists. Sonya pulls the razor out of her pocket with her free hand, and, moving the pillow up a bit, slits the crone's saggy throat. The life-sapped, bony senile body is losing its blood for a long time, shivering under Sonya in anticipation of coming death, but then stiffens and goes still. Having finished the hag, Sonya picks out the Michurin seeds from the pile and hides them in her jacket pocket. Then she finds in the yard the bucket Fyodor talked about. It turned out to be full of simple stagnant green water.

When Sonya brings the bucket to the legless man, he is already sitting in his machine, shifting long levers with a metallic clang. He pours the liquid into the engine; the tractor coughs hoarsely, jerks forward, and settles into a loud clatter. Sonya manages to hop onto the cab step just before Fyodor, swaying wildly in his seat with a

furious howl, revs the machine away from its nesting site. Staggering, the tractor crawls onto the rural road, scattering chunks of wet soil from under its wheels. Legless Fyodor, having tamed its shuddering rusty bulk, steers confidently towards the north, barking obscene commands to himself and howling wildly and abruptly from time to time.

By the overcast dawn, Sonya climbs onto the tractor driver's severed laps, wraps her arms around his neck, and, pressing her head to his chest, drifts off to sleep, exhausted from the past night. And Fyodor, all alone, continues to take her where he himself has never been.

Pox is writhing on the grass with a rasping gasp; pale green foam is seeping from her mouth, and her pupils are lost entirely beneath her wide-staring lids.

— Look at her twisting after just three toadstools, — says Bear respectfully, darning his hat.

— Watch out, Pox, you're gonna croak, — worries Rat, pacing around his sprawled—out girlfriend, his shoulders creaking under the strain of the machine gun.

— The toadstools are where the power's at, — says Bear, biting the thread off.

Natasha lies propped up on her elbow near a fallen trunk, watching the female partisan, tormented by shamanic visions, clawing at the grass with her fingers. Leshy is smoking a roll-up and cleaning his gun, gazing at the river with a glassy stare. Invisible Upyr is on sentry duty in the bushes. The rain has ceased, and the pale moon is peeking mysteriously out from behind the grey shadowy clouds.

— I see it! — suddenly yells epiphanic Pox, gesturing wildly at the sky and spraying spit. Rat collapses onto her, pinning her shoulders down while a frenzied seizure lashes through his girlfriend's strong body. — I see the gardens of fire, growing on black water! I see the girl, going northwards, rushing northwards, tearing the skin of the earth! The devil is taking her there; the devil is dragging her there, the relentless fascist force! The birds are ripping the flesh, tearing it, shredding the bloody flesh! Tearing the juicy flesh, spurting blood! — Pox's screams plunge into the delusional abyss. — Blue mushes, bloody flesh! — she howls repeatedly, arching her back under Rat. — Blue mushes, bloody flesh!

Leshy, coming to Rat's aid, douses Pox's head with icy river water

from a mess tin. Bear stands up, pulling his hat onto his head. Through the narrow, wrinkled slits in his face, his eyes glare unkindly toward the north, as if pondering how to end the whole world.

In the unclear light of the nascent November morning a lorry with “Bread” written on it stops on the bridge over the river. Honking the horn, the driver jumps down onto the asphalt and walks up to the lowered barrier. His unshaved mug is warped in the glass of the security booth, resembling a prickly pig snout. He bashes the barrier with a crowbar and screams profanities at the security booth, his watery eyes bulging. A burst of fire answers him. The driver flinches as bullets rip into him, then collapses backward onto the asphalt with a thud, his crowbar clattering. Leshy's bow-legged figure appears in the mist. At first he nudges the driver's face with his boot, holding his weapon and puffing on his roll-up, and then he inspects the lorry fastidiously. A short whistle means that the lorry is fine. Emerging from under the bridge as if from the ground itself, the partisans climb into the back of the lorry, tossing trays of enemy food supplies straight into the river. Leshy raises the barrier, stepping over the body of the fascist traffic regulator lying in the booth, and climbs into the cab. Crossing the bridge, the lorry is roaring, and mounting anger can be heard in its roar.

Sonya wakes up when it is already fully light. Thick smoky clouds are moving above her; the blue ice holes in them are edged with the rays of the autumnal sun. The rumble of the moving tractor shatters the stillness of the fields falling asleep for winter. Five birds are drifting eastwards in a ragged wedge on a light ripple of wind, assuming that there is a lot of warmth and light where the sun rises. Cheek pressed against Fyodor's strong chest, Sonya yawns and looks sleepily at the fields passing by.

The partisans catch up with the tractor around noon, where the road crosses a leafless forest. The lorry pulls out to overtake and, pulling up about fifty metres ahead, turns around and crawls back towards the tractor. The partisans jump from the back into the off-road muck and follow the vehicle on foot.

— Surrender, you louse! — yells Leshy from the cab as it pitches on the humps.

— Surrender, you louse! — yells Pox, and clicks her assault rifle.

Fyodor slows down, keeping the engine running. Sonya climbs down from his lap, without any sudden movements, so as not to start

the shooting. Her body is trembling slightly with fear of the heavy bullet strikes. Surrendering, she raises her hands.

— Take them alive, — snaps Bear, his boots heavily churning the water-filled rut.

The vehicles slowly continue coming together. Fyodor stares with ossified eyes at the mud-spattered windscreen and at the lorry's terrifying, bug-eyed face, its gill-like maw bared in a snarl. Natasha is walking on the left side of the lorry, clenching the sawn-off with her varnished nails. A thin strand of hair is falling down on her face, and she blows it away through clenched teeth. She has a bandage around her waist, covering her wounded side. She is looking into Sonya's light semi-transparent eyes, calm and still, like the stars. She is looking at Sonya's unbrushed hair and at her raised hands, with her thin wrists poking out from her jacket sleeves. She is looking at the girl's open palms, showing that she has no weapons, and sees a one-metre circle glowing with pale yellow light above her fingertips. As if spellbound, Natasha is looking at the clear solar ring, slightly blurred by the field wind, until it breaks from its place, glides silently through the air, and shatters the lorry's glass with a clang, engulfing the cab in flames.

With a savage howl, Leshy flings himself from the cab to the roadside; his clothes are burning. Natasha is searching for Sonya with her eyes to shoot her with the sawn-off, but Sonya is gone. She only sees Fyodor's frenzied face, directing his tractor straight at her to bypass on the left the lorry abandoned by its driver. Natasha lunges into the trees, shooting at the tractor driver as she runs, while, behind her, Bear opens fire with his assault rifle. The bullets break Fyodor's body, tearing the blood together with flesh out of his clothes, but the firm hands of the legless man continue to rev the satanically roaring machine even harder. Bear falls back, continuing to pump bullet after bullet into Fyodor; from somewhere across the road, Rat's machine gun begins to chatter, drowning out the roar of the engine. The tractor's tires burst, and it begins to spin its wheels in the mud. Somewhere on the other side the lorry slams into a tree, finally smashing its burning cab to pieces. A wave of fire surges through the tractor, piercing through Bear standing in the middle of the ruts. Roaring fiercely in pain, the squad leader staggers back into the cover of the trees. Far ahead of the tractor, Natasha spots Sonya running down the road, whose rapid movement had cost her her invisibility. Natasha takes aim at her, pressing the sawn-off to her shoulder. Sonya's little figure blurs in the heat raising from the burning tractor, where legless Fyodor finds a burial worthy of a great viking, and then suddenly, she simply vanishes into thin air. Natasha screams in a fit of

rage and lunges after her, but the road ahead is utterly empty, and she soon stops, sobbing in powerless frustration, and, raising the sawn-off, she shoots into the lifeless forest without aiming.

Black Moscow

And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

Rev. 1:17 — 1:18

Tearing off her jacket as she goes, and tossing it onto the road, Sonya keeps running and running from the scene of the fight, without noticing that there are no partisans and no burning vehicles behind her anymore. She stops only when lightweight snowflakes appear out of the air, sticking to her face and staying on her skin as cold droplets. Covering her eyes with her wrist, she looks back and sees only the field under the overcast snowy sky. Such silence reigns in the field that one can hear the snowflakes whisper against one another. Sonya is walking down the road covered with white coating, leaving small barefoot prints, until a dark wide belt of stone trees appears up ahead.

The forest of stone is full of sepulchral serenity. Sonya is not reflecting either in the mirror-like bark of the black trunks, soaring into the foggy abyss of the hibernal sky, or in the pearlescent shimmering labyrinth of the anthracite branches, as if she does not exist in reality. Snow is falling here slowly and continuously, disturbed by no wind, and no bird breaks the stillness of the trees once engulfed in the indestructible eternity of their new material.

Sonya is going deeper and deeper into the forest, feeling the scalding breath of the frost that reigns in it, but the snow is not stinging her bare feet anymore, only wrapping them in its soft palms with a gentle crunch. Through the curtain of the falling snowflakes Sonya starts to make out amidst the snowbanks the frozen figures of the dead Pioneers, raising their arms for the salute, and looking straight ahead with their blue faces into the eternal tranquillity of the winter. The crimson ties are ablaze on their necks; the snowflakes are melting on the silk fabric, unable to quench the cosmic fire of the

children's memory. Sonya passes by them, peering into their calm young faces and their eyes, as clear as her own. Amidst them she finds Tanya standing tall by a mirror-like trunk with her hand raised, and this new hand that knows no rat blood and no poisonous nocturnal rains seems to be the cleanest part of Tanya's body thoroughly washed by death.

— Do you recognise me, Tanya? — asks Sonya in a whisper, stopping opposite Tanya. Tanya is silent. Her eyes are looking through Sonya at the vertical current of snow. Turning around, Sonya sees that Alexei is standing opposite Tanya, and his face is not grim anymore, but full of clear and bright contemplation of time destined to come many years hence.

— Tanya, it's me, Sonya, — Sonya touches the girl's face with her fingers. Tanya's skin is cold like river ice. Not hearing Sonya's voice, she continues looking at her friend Alexei. Her eyelashes are covered with hoar frost, and her hair is full of snowflakes fallen from the sky. Sonya puts her palms on Tanya's cheeks and breathes into her face. But even her hot breath cannot melt the permafrost of Tanya's enchanted sleep.

Sonya walks through the forest of stone, approaching a frosty boy or a frosty girl from time to time, and vainly trying to make them remember life. She strokes the Pioneers with her hands, kisses their blue faces with golden lips, and presses her hot heart against them. However, the terrible eternal frost, having no temperature, is stronger than Sonya's love, so the Pioneers continue giving their eternal salute, and the snow continues falling, like the petals of the icy cherries blooming in the sky, and the mirror-like trees, as if coated in negative film, reflect its continuous downward movement.

The forest is thinning out and Sonya emerges onto the endless marble cosmodrome. There is no snow on it, but the frosty needles still pierce through Sonya's feet when she is treading barefoot on the polished black stone. In the middle of the stone space stands the enormous black pyramid, and twelve beautiful Komsomol girls with plaited hair wearing black knee-length dresses are holding torches in their hands, burning with a bluish flame of the communist spring.

Sonya approaches the pyramid slowly, and the snowflakes melt on her unblinking eyes. She comes up to the stairs ascending the pyramid wall to the summit. The Komsomol girls descend to her, quietly treading with their bare svelte feet on the wide marble steps.

— Hello, brave girl, — whispers one of them, the one with chestnut hair. — Finally you have come, the girl with the sinister talisman in her chest, in order to make the sun of hope rise above the eternal winter, — the Komsomol girl bends down to Sonya and kisses her temple.

— Who are you? — asks Sonya.

— We are the archangels of the revolution, — the girls reply in a whispered unison. — We are the vestals of the Black Pyramid, the keepers of the eternal flame of communism; we are the Komsomol girls who died young and sinless; we collect human blood so that the fire of communism does not go out in the hearts of the future generations. Our feet, treading on the steps of the sacred stone, do not know the tight court shoes; our ears, hearing all the sounds of the world, do not know the earrings; our nails, touching the sacrificial bowls, do not know the chemical varnish, and our mouths, bearing the prophetic word of communism, do not know the deceptive lipstick. Our hair cannot be unplaited, because the leader's precept plaits it; our dresses cannot be removed, because the leader's precept holds them together; our thoughts are always pure, because the leader's thought lasts in them eternally...

— Lenin, — utters Sonya quietly, closing her eyes. — He is here, nearby.

— Lenin is asleep, — whispers the Komsomol girl with chestnut hair whose name is Vera. — In his Black Mausoleum, on the Black Square of the Black Kremlin.

— Asleep? — asks Sonya.

— Eternal cold shackles the leader; the power of a terrible curse guards his mortal slumber, — whispers the second girl who has fair hair and whose name is Zhenya. — No one, no one can enter the Black Mausoleum, because there is no entering there. Only you can do it, you, brave girl with the sinister talisman in your chest. But for this you need to get into the Black Kremlin which is guarded by the dead communists. They can kill you with the eternal death. They can make you disappear forever. They have plunged everything into eternal frost. Soon they will get here, because the fire of the communism is fading. It lacks pure human blood.

— Yes, human blood has become filthy, — sighs a dark—haired thin Komsomol girl, whose facial features are familiar to Sonya. — It looks

more and more like the blood of the pigs.

— Have I seen you somewhere? — asks Sonya. — Your face seems familiar to me.

— Of course you have seen me, — the girl smiles with a gentle sadness. — Look, — she puts back the collar of her dress, showing the purple scar on her thin neck.

— Zoya, — recognises Sonya. — That means you live here. That means they could not hang you.

— I have been alive even before the revolution, and human death has no power over me. But soon we will all die. Soon the eternal frost of time will shroud us.

— No, — says Sonya. — I will go and wake Lenin up.

— I feel very sorry for you, brave girl, — says Zoya. — But you have too little power to defeat the dead communists. You will perish, just as many who came to Lenin before you have perished.

— She has the sinister talisman in her chest, — Vera interrupts her. — Maybe it will help her.

— And you? — asks Sonya. — Will you not help me?

— We cannot leave the Black Pyramid, — answers a Komsomol girl with a split lip named Anya. — That is the leader's precept, and we cannot break it. We must defend the fire of communism to the last. Maybe our faith was not strong enough. We cannot live far from the sacred flame.

— But we can do one thing for you, — adds Zoya quietly. — We will give you some sacred fire. Just a little, because it is weak already.

Zoya turns around and approaches the wall of the Black Pyramid, merges with her reflection, and vanishes. Soon she comes back, holding a spark of blinding light in her hand.

— This will be enough to shatter the frost of death for one person outside, — she whispers, moving the fire into Sonya's outstretched hand. — Dear girl, that is all we can do for you. Now farewell, you must make haste before the spark in your hand goes out.

Cosmic frost fills Sonya again as she moves further away from the

Black Pyramid, so that it even becomes difficult for her to breathe. In her cupped hands she is carrying the spark of the sacred fire into the forest of stone, fearing that the falling snow may extinguish it on the way. The fire is warming her palms less and less, and Sonya starts running, pressing her hands to her chest and sliding on the icy black marble. She rushes up to the first Pioneer she sees, who stands with his back to her, stumbling and nearly falling into a snowbank as she goes, and presses the spark of the flame gifted to her against his back.

The Pioneer remains still for some time, and Sonya looks with bated breath at his thin arm raised in the salute. Finally the hand goes down and wipes the hoar frost from his face.

— Hey, — says Sonya. Her voice sounds somewhat off in the oppressive snowy silence of the forest of stone.

The boy turns around to her. He has a thin face and dark curly hair. A Pioneer drum hangs on his chest.

— It was me who woke you up, — she says. — Lenin's cause is in danger. While he is asleep, the fire of communism may die out. He must be woken up at all costs.

The Pioneer raises his eyes to the sky, as if remembering something, and Sonya is frightened that he has forgotten who Lenin is in his frosty sleep, but the boy's hands suddenly grab the drumsticks, and the dry rattle of the Pioneer alert sounds in the forest of stone. The drummer is beating desperately, his thin face twisted with effort, and Sonya sees the dead Pioneers, ready to fulfil their sacred duty, wake up from their sleep all over the forest.

— I hit her after all, — roars Upyr, noticing the jacket Sonya dropped on the road.

— It's only a jacket, — says Leshy coldly, looking into his field-glasses. — There's no girl in it. She slipped away, this scumbag.

Pox is swearing and spitting into the unusually clean snow lying by the side of the abandoned road. Leshy turns his binoculars perpendicular to the road and sees in them the endless black walls of Moscow.

— Moscow, — he wheezes blissfully. — It's Moscow, lads.

Bear is looking into the binoculars taken away from Leshy for a long time, and, snuffling, he sniffs the snow. Obeying his silent sign, the

partisans leave the road and head towards Black Moscow through the snowy field. Their wind-beaten faces wince against the tightening frost. Barely audible, Rat starts singing a grim partisan's song, telling of the hopeless angst of the living dead cast into the enemy rear.

The walls of Moscow are rising slowly from the snowy desert, like a vast armoured ship bearing down upon the partisans. The metal of the assault rifle chills Natasha's hands to the bone; the icy nails enter her eyes deeper and deeper, forcing out tears through the pain. They drop from her white cheeks, and her drying lips draw tight into a motionless semblance of a smile. With this smile of a doll, Natasha is walking through the uneven field, and before her eyes the cold bloody sea is rolling lazily onto the deserted hibernal shore.

— Halt, — orders Bear quietly. Off to the side of the squad's route, in the midst of the field, stands a man wearing a military greatcoat and a ushanka with a half-faded crimson star. The partisans sink silently into the snow.

— Hey, mate! — Upyr yells to the soldier. — Who are you?

The soldier turns around. His face is covered with indelible wrinkles of past battles. He is holding a rifle in his hands.

— I'm a soldier, — he answers simply. — I don't even have a surname.

— Drop your rifle, or I'll shoot you, — yells Rat, setting up his machine gun in front of him.

— Shoot, scum; the bullet doesn't hurt me, — says the soldier calmly. — I'm standing guard here; the enemy advance is coming soon.

Bear fires a single round into the soldier for verification. The bullet pierces through the soldier's tunic, drawing no blood.

— He's one of ours, — roars Bear, gazing at the ragged hole on the tunic behind which emptiness darkens. — Tell us where the foe is; we will stand to the last.

— This is the last stand, — answers the soldier. — Moscow is behind us.

Without labouring to dig into the frozen earth, the partisans lay low in the field, preparing for battle. The Unknown Soldier is standing

behind them, like a standard. Natasha settles behind a hummock of frozen earth and lays out cartridges on a blood-stained handkerchief spread over the snow. She closes her eyes so they sting less from the cold. Drumbeats echo in the distance.

— They're coming, — Upyr wheezes quietly. — They're coming, the bastards.

Sparse lines of the dead Pioneers move across the snow-clad desert, marching in barefoot step. The crimson ties on their necks glow child blood through the blizzard. They are closing in, and the song of the drum is soaring skyward, telling about the immeasurable and eternal joy of dying for Lenin's cause. This song is flying above the beautiful white child faces, glowing with happiness of the justified death, and the partisans freeze in their graves, like frogs that crawled out onto the January ice. The golden lips of the children move in their transparent Pioneer's oath; its power grows; even the veil of snowflakes falling from the sky becomes golden.

— Advance, — the Unknown Soldier shouts madly, and moves towards the enemy, levelling his bayonet. — Advance, brothers.

But the partisans cannot stand up and follow him. They already see the clear eyes of the oncoming Pioneers, and read their final death in them.

— Ooorah! — yells the Unknown Soldier without picking up the pace. — Ooorah!

Streaks of fire surge from his boots across the snowy fields, crashing into the ranks of the Pioneers and sowing all-consuming doom. Some of the Pioneers fall into the snow with thin cries, turning into blue ash. The hands of the Pioneers swing up in the salute, and a blue lightning connects the field with the invisible sky. The Unknown Soldier falls, ripped apart by the electricity, and the snow evaporates from his body, turning into rain in the branching of the lightning streams. The Pioneers swing with their hands again, and the second lightning strikes the Soldier, killing thousands of lives trapped in him. Several times the Soldier rises and falls down, until the last strike ignites his emptied body that remains lying the field forever, engulfed in the eternal fire.

The partisans watch the reprisal in silence. Regrouping mid-stride to close the gaps torn in their ranks by fire, the Pioneers pass by the Soldier. Natasha is now able to discern their faces; she recognises

Tanya who formerly threw the jemmy into her head, and her finger grips the trigger. The shot drowns out the drum roll for a moment, and, snapping out of their cursed trance, the partisans open fire. Ripped by bullets, several Pioneers collapse into the snow. Their thin hands sharply give the salute again, and the lightning bolts thunderously blast the frozen earth. Reloading her sawn-off with shaking hands, Natasha sees Leshy's body burn, face down in the snow, and the blood slowly soaking into the snow forms a dark stain around him. Leshy's head is split open like a half-eaten melon. Grenades thrown by Pox are exploding ahead. Two Pioneers, a boy and a girl, soar into the blizzard and fall head-first onto the ground breaking their necks. One more boy, his arms outspread, remains lying near the crater; he lost everything below his stomach; the blood is gushing out of him, and his guts are sliding into the pit. Natasha is aiming at Tanya's face, but the frenzied thunder makes her vision go dark, and she falls mouth-down onto the barrel of the sawn-off, her hair splaying across the bloodied snow.

The same strike hurls Pox backwards, tearing her hand and her assault rifle away from her wrist, and she hits the hard ground flat on her back. Pox's clothes are full of blood. Time is moving slowly for her; the snow stops in the air unable to descend on her face. Turning her head she looks at her shattered arm painting the snow with crimson, and further on, at the chunks of her leader's massive body scattered in a bloody circle several metres wide, and beyond it, at the mutilated corpse of one-eyed Rat, his throat torn, frozen beside his machine gun choked on its own barking, and at Natasha's body clenching her sawn-off in her sleep, and at Upyr crawling wearily towards the enemy. She watches him pluck the pin from the grenade and the stony clods of earth soar into the air. The blast wave sear Pox's face; droplets of fresh blood fall onto her cheeks. She sees a boy's face hovering over her, and she believes that she sees an angel, remembering after so many years the prayers of her pre-war mother and the ikon near the cockroach stove. The golden lips touch her tight mouth, and the electric shock pierces her throat forever.

Natasha opens her eyes. The snow is moving endlessly, like hordes of white furry moths rushing to leave offspring in their brief lifetime. Sonya is sitting on her heels beside her. They are at the bottom of silence. Natasha feels that the end is nigh. The wordless gaze of death has stopped at her. She starts hearing one single sound: the flow of blood deep inside her palate.

— How can this be? — she asks Sonya quietly. — There is no life anywhere now, after all.

— You don't know about life, — answers Sonya. — Here, drink, — she puts her wrist to Natasha's mouth. — Take your blood back.

— I don't want it, — whispers Natasha. — I'm tired of walking.

— Drink, — says Sonya fondly. — I love you.

Natasha bites into the girl's wrist carefully. The fiery blood is burning her mouth; she is moaning in pain.

— Drink, — repeats Sonya patiently, pressing her hand against Natasha's mouth more tightly.

Natasha takes two sucking gulps, and Sonya draws her hand back.

— I hear the song of the sun, — says Natasha, and a pale smile breaks across her face. — It cannot be seen, but I hear it sing.

— That is good, — answers Sonya, covering her wound with a piece of snow. — It means that death is over. You are alive again.

— How can I be alive? — says Natasha, disbelieving. — The sorrow of the after—death roaming fills me.

— That will pass, — says Sonya. — Do you feel it? Your blood is turning red again. Like the blooming roses.

Natasha spreads her arms out, placing them in the cold snow. The enormous space does not seem alien to her anymore, as long as there exists Sonya, who loves her. Natasha inhales the space, filling herself with the coldness of eternal love.

— I have to go, — says Sonya. — The assault is about to begin.

— I'm coming with you, — says Natasha.

— No, you're going that way, — Sonya points in the direction the partisans came from. — The seeds of evil have already grown. Find them and help me. If I'm alive, — she adds sadly.

— If you're alive? — repeats Natasha with fear.

— Without Lenin we will all die, — says Sonya confidently. — Without Lenin everything will perish. The eternal frost will set in.

Sonya stands up and walks towards Black Moscow. The Pioneer drum begins to beat in the distance. Walking through the snowy

fields, Natasha looks back and sees the lines of the Pioneers closing in on the city walls. “Soar up in bonfires, blue nights!” — the advancing Pioneers sing. The black gates, engraved with skulls, vanish, and the dead chekists emerge from them in silence. They do not have human faces, like dolls made of soft matter. They raise their rifles and fire with a dry crack, without aiming. And every single silver bullet hits right in the heart. The Pioneers fall; blood creeps across the snow from their white shirts; their bodies start burning, turning into bright ephemeral fires. In the azure glare of the lightning, fresh ranks of chekists emerge from the breach of the gates. Natasha, not looking back anymore, runs forward. The earth, quaking with thunder, lies spread before her without end or limit, as if the cursed Galilei had deceived the humanity.

She runs, leaping over frozen mounds and screaming in fear, because she does not know what awaits her in the desolate expanses of the fields. The road ahead reveals Sonya's jacket; right next to it, two—metre stems rise directly from the snow, bearing leaves and massive buds. Natasha, exhausted, approaches the plants, gritting her teeth in pain. They grow before her eyes, barely perceptibly, yet inexorably expanding into the frosty space of the realm of death.

— The damned turnsoles, — Natasha utters a name that surfaced in her mind out of nowhere. — The damned turnsoles, sweet flowers of death.

Her hands, of their own will, reach for the closed buds risen through the cold infertility of the impenetrable frost from the magical Michurin seeds. She already starts to understand their new feature created by the scientific witchcraft, not by nature, and her face lights up with the joy of knowledge.

— Look! — shouts Natasha, raising her face towards the empty sky. — Look what I have for you! — her hands tear through the dense walls of the buds, unfurling petals glowing yellow against the light.

Natasha opens the turnsoles one after another, peering into the now-black seeds, as if burnt by the hellfire. And the rain begins. Far away, by the walls of Black Moscow, Sonya is laughing merrily, reaching out her hands to the water pouring from the sky. A huge rainbow brightens over the battlefield. Flaming light comes through the off-white abyss of the clouds; it is the sun coming out, drawn by the damned turnsoles.

The dead chekists meet the advent of the artificial spring with

howling, trying to hide in the breach of the black walls. They burst into flames even before they fall, and the melting snow gets covered with piles of burning ash. They fall and roll on the ground, trying to quench the flame burning them from within. And somewhere in the thawing fields a young girl with a beautiful rustic face is gently unfurling the petals of the terrible flowers; she is full of love to the senseless plant life, and she is whispering to them the words of an unclear language, the one that the sun speaks.

Taking the drum from the Pioneer killed by a silver bullet, Tanya beats the morning reveille. Over flaming heaps of bodies, the Pioneers enter Black Moscow with a song. The streets are ablaze with the bodies of doomed warriors of death, and Sonya recoils in horror at their vast multitude. Their burning creates such heat, that meltwaters are already flowing under the Pioneers' feet, forming streams. Across a deserted avenue dotted with patches of fire, an old black car stands at an angle, its front engulfed in flames; in the rear seat, a thin officer in a leather coat leans his head back. Blood is dropping from the cracks in his small round glasses. The officer's face is a dark earthy colour. Sonya approaches the car, and, picking the glasses off the dead man with two fingers, smashes them hard against the asphalt. The corpse inside the car is slowly being engulfed in flames, because Beria's glasses do not help him see the future and dodge the close gaze of death anymore.

The sun is shining unbearably in the meltwater puddles. Led by the roll of drums, the Pioneers are moving through the streets of Black Moscow, past derelict houses with shattered windows and crumbling walls browned by time. The huge city surrounding them is dead; no one lives in it, and the houses fall apart on their own, oppressed by the aimlessness of their existence.

Sonya's keen eyes see a black stripe at the far end of a long street, and her acute nostrils catch wafts of a terrible stench drifting towards the squad of the little victors. She understands that a new foe is gathering up ahead; a foe that is more terrible and dangerous than the previous one. Sonya halts her warriors with a shout and goes alone towards the wind carrying the unbearable reek.

Wait for me, says Natasha's voice in her temples. Now it is my turn to kill them. And Sonya stops obediently in the middle of the street in order to wait.

When Natasha unfurled the petals of the last turnsole, she lied down into blackening snow and began looking into azure sky calling to the

birds that had flown south forever. She wanted a second sun to come out, a sun as bright as the first one, because the sun does feel lonely in the boundless azure space; it does not have Sonya; it does not have a little clear-eyed sister who could love it. And let two suns burn everything alive, Natasha thought; it does not matter; let the boiling heat fall onto earth; let everything alive die, because the nature of everything is not at all life.

And then, right next to her, the ground, which used to be a frozen river, split open with a crack; and its chunks drifted across the melting field; and fresh vernal air stormed into the released water; and the river devil emerged from the water, leading a black dead horse by the bridle; and his head was pierced through by a bullet, but the wound healed over time.

— You have melted the ice of the eternal winter, beautiful girl, — said the river devil in a hissing voice. — You have returned the fishes into the world of light; you have freed me from the curse of death. Take my horse and my sabre, because I sense how much you love to kill.

Natasha stepped into the mud and took the rusty sabre from his greenish hand. Malachite eyes of the river devil glowed with new youth; his fangs bared in a semblance of a joyful smile.

— Finally my sabre will be stained with blood once again, — he hissed. — Now I must not keep it at the river bottom. Ride, beautiful girl, and bring forth death. Ride and kill, and may your hand never grow weary of hewing and slaying. Of hewing and slaying.

Natasha slid her boot into the stirrup and mounted the horse, which snorted angrily beneath her and bolted forward. The sabre felt as if it had grown into her palm, and she felt a surge of immense power of death rising in her chest. She looked back at the place where the river devil was standing, but he was already gone. And then she remembered where she had seen this sly moustached face. The horse carried her through the melting fields; a wind scented with eternal spring stung her eyes. Love and hate merged into one giant, agonizing feeling; the fire of unhuman freedom was raging in her blood. No one could stop her because in her hand she held the second sinister talisman — the sabre of the Civil War hero, the Red cavalryman Chapayev.

When the dead sailors launch their bayonet charge with a terrifying roar, Sonya hurls fire at them. Its blast tears two mighty brown bodies

to foetid pieces. Sonya backs away, hurling fire again, but the sailors are too many, and she cannot stop their black wave. The drum begins to beat again, and azure lightnings strike from the cloudless sky, as if the whole firmament consisted of a flat electric capacitor saving deadly energy in its palm. Sonya runs back, and the sailors crash into the Pioneer ranks, ripping the child bodies open with bayonets and bashing their heads with rifle butts. As they kill, the sailors let out beastly roars; their boots trample the corpses of the Pioneers fallen on the asphalt, crushing and staining them with earthy mud. Their leader, a hulking sailor-partisan Zhelezniak, hacks his way towards the drummer girl and plunges a long bayonet into her face like a pitchfork, cleaving through Tanya's skull and ripping her throat apart in a single blow. The girl falls onto her back, and her drumsticks twitch against the asphalt several times before her hands freeze in stillness. Moving forward, the sailor steps on Tanya's stomach breaking her ribs with his terrible weight. One of the Pioneers leaps onto Zhelezniak's back, digging his fingers into the nape of his neck. The sailor's face contorts in a spasm from the powerful electric shocks surging from the boy's hands, yet he still delivers a butt-stroke over his shoulder, and Alexei falls back with a shattered skull, his hands releasing their grip. Turning around, the sailor plunges the bayonet into his stomach like a shovel, leaning on a bent leg, and lifts Alexei's twitching body on it in order to hurl it to the side of the street. And then a gasping horse thunders past him, and Chapayev's sabre whistles as it shears the big head from the slant-eyed, bloat-faced sailor; the massive body crumples to the road, hitting it with a fountain of stinky blood.

Natasha swings broad, slashing a second sailor crosswise; she lops off a third’s arm and then his head before driving her horse onward to trample the chest of a fourth, who is gripping his neck seared by current. One of the sailors stabs the horse to its side with his bayonet, letting charcoal blood out; the horsewoman turns around and splits his head open, like a watermelon, down to his collarbone, splattering the face of a tow-haired Pioneer girl standing nearby with stinky brains. The sabre whistles with every swing, and the sailors, having already lost their leader, fall back. Natasha strikes from above, pushing off the stirrups and putting the full weight of her body into the blow until her back aches; then she strikes from the flank, swinging her sabre behind her and twisting her torso sharply toward the enemy. She cries like a bird, cleaving the bones and the muscles of the mighty male bodies asunder, in order to send the dark blood streaming out in gurgling bursts.

A group of sailors gathers before her in a short line, bayonets

forward, but fire cast by Sonya slams into the formation, splitting it down the middle, and the crunching blows of the sabre finally break the enemy's resistance. The sailors flee, and Natasha dashes after them, cutting down every victim with a single precise and powerful stroke of her sabre. She rides down the streets of the dead city, screaming wildly, and the echo of hollow windows picks up her scream. She kills until there is no one left to kill, and only then she comes back to the scene of the fight. Sonya sits on the ground by Tanya's corpse, plunging her hands into the streams of meltwater.

— Return back, — says Sonya to the few surviving Pioneers. — You cannot go any further. You must stay and render the eternal salute.

The Pioneers stand in mournful silence, looking down at their fallen comrades. There are no tears in their eyes.

— You have won, — says Sonya. — Your faith has been stronger. No one stands in my path anymore.

She stands up and goes towards approaching Natasha shrouded in a halo of velvet sunbeams. Clear meltwater is rushing around Sonya's ankles. She welcomes Natasha's return with a shout, and Sonya's girl friend answers her, drooping her long lashes in the warm vernal light.

Along the glistening street lie the black corpses of the sailors hewn by Natasha, their tarry blood washed away by the water. A sailor’s cap with short ribbons sweeps past Sonya, spinning slowly on the surface of the water. The current forms swirls and eddies around the hooves of Natasha's horse. Looking back, Sonya sees the departing Pioneers and the reflections of ruined blind houses in the water. Sonya mournfully recalls Tanya and Alexei as she continues her path, bidding them a silent farewell in the stillness, broken only by the murmuring stream and the splash of her own footsteps. She takes hold of the stirrup and leads Natasha to the Black Kremlin. The wind is ruffling their hair.

Between houses, the Kremlin towers topped with glowing black stars are visible. They are glowing above the walls, at an unreachable height, whither the wind brings the white clouds. Sonya stops, awestruck by the grand spectacle of magical serenity, amassing in the cerulean expanse above the capital of death. And the earth trembles beneath her feet. Sonya's bare feet unerringly pick up the vibration of the strike from the right; she turns her face towards it, pulling her head back slightly to see past Natasha obstructing her line of sight. She sees a gigantic figure touching the sky. Stone Lenin.

He roars dreadfully, raising his fierce granite face close to the sky, and at his roar, the worn-out walls of distant buildings collapse with a thunderous clatter. He takes another step, breaking a five-storey house standing in his way, so that the dust rises way up to his waist. Natasha drags Sonya up onto the horse.

— Ride forward! — yells Sonya, trying to shout over a fresh burst of frenzied roaring. Natasha sets her horse into a gallop, steering straight for the Kremlin gates. The stone giant is coming towards them with huge strides smashing houses with his knees left and right. As he goes, he tears a concrete lamp post from the ground and hurls it at the girls like a bat. Spinning several times in the air, the post clears the Kremlin wall and crashes into massive spruces with a loud crack.

Natasha charges out onto the Black Square right after it, and the hooves are thundering against the marble slabs toward the Mausoleum. At the black columns, she reins in her horse and lets Sonya down; she runs on alone and slams into the monolithic stone wall, which swallows her like the eternal darkness. Sonya finds herself in a small room lit by a dusty light bulb; in the middle of the room stands a glass-topped coffin, and inside the coffin lies Lenin.

His eyes are closed; his chest does not heave with breath. His face is covered by newspaperish yellowness. He is wearing a black suit and a white shirt; his arms are folded over his chest.

Lenin is dead, says in Sonya's head the thunderous voice of the stone monster.

You're lying, answers Sonya, gasping for air, and smashes the coffin lid open with her palm.

The shards are falling onto the floor. Blood is pouring out of the cut on Sonya's hand. With a terrifying crash, the Kremlin walls crumble, pierced by the monster's granite foot.

— Wake up, Lenin, — pleads Sonya.

He is dead, repeats the golem's fierce roar. You believed the fairy tale. Lenin is long dead already. Why have you broken the coffin. Now you will die too. You will die forever.

You will never see the sun again. You will die forever.

You're lying, scum, cries Sonya. You're lying.

But she understands that he is not lying. The huge Lenin of black granite is truly alive. Decades of human venerations gave life to the golem. And this little human body lying in the coffin in front of Sonya is just a dried corpse of an old diseased man who died long ago.

Lenin is long dead. Why have you broken the coffin. Why have you disturbed the peace. Now you will die.

The roaring becomes unbearable for human hearing. Sonya presses her palms against her ears.

Come out, or I will break the Mausoleum.

Sonya is wiping her tears; she does not want the golem to see her cry. Before coming out on the square, she bends down to Lenin's breathless face and kisses him goodbye into his forehead smelling of hospital chemicals. And then Lenin opens his eyes.

— Hello, giwl, — he says cheerfully at once, as if Sonya did not wake him up, but simply met him in the hallway before his office. — Is it time to get up alweady?

Sonya cannot answer anything. Lenin rises from the coffin and brushes dust and glass shards off his suit jacket.

— Whewe is it I have been? Have I been lying in a coffin? — Lenin deftly unbuttons his suit jacket, takes hold of the lapels, and lets out a loud laugh. — That's wight, enough lounging in the coffin, you'll sleep thwough the entiwe wowld wevolution!

A fearsome stone blow crashes against the Mausoleum wall. It cracks apart, and shards of facing slabs shower down from the breach onto the floor of the room. Through the black dust a huge grinning face of the monster is visible, crudely mimicking the face of the person standing before Sonya. The golem lunges forward, its granite fingers clawing the air; a hellish volcanic roar bursts from its throat, followed by a surge of searing heat.

— And what is this? — Ilych laughs infectiously. — This gwanite titan weawing a flat cap, is that me? Ha-ha-ha! — his face suddenly turns serious. — That won't do. That should be wemoved, — Lenin swings with his arm decisively, and a terrible flaming whirlwind sweeps over Kremlin, covering the golem's stone body, and eats away at him, sucking black dusty whirls out of the monster, as if he was made from simple coal sand. Bent double, the giant's silhouette begins to dissolve; a blurred chunk falls from his chest, revealing the flaming

abyss behind.

— We'll all buwn, mate, it's inevitable, — Lenin notes cheerfully, looking at the giant burning like a skyscraper, and putting his hand on Sonya's shoulder. — And you, boys and giwls, will have to build houses from these element-accumulated wuins. And that's that.